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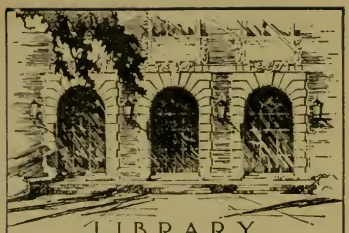

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WHAT HE COST HER.

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WHAT HE COST HER.

BY

JAMES PAYN,

AUTHOR OF "LOST SIR MASSINGBERD," "WALTER'S WORD,"
"FALLEN FORTUNES," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.—VOL. II.

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WHAT HE COST HER.

CHAPTER I.

AT THE ABBEY.

It is one of the many proofs of the enthusiasm of youth, and of the sanguine ideas that enter into the human breast even at a later period, in connection with the holy estate of matrimony, that so many newly-married couples should select the Lake District as the scene of their honeymoon. For the wet weather so prevalent in that locality, and the absence of all other amusements save that derived from gazing at the scenery, make a honeymoon there less a "trial trip," as Mr. Landon prosaically called it, than a crucial test of companionship, under which more than one happy pair has been known to break down. This, however, let us

hasten to declare, was not the case with Cecil and Ella. They were exceptionally fortunate in the weather, and even when they were kept within doors—which was not more than four days out of the seven—their social barometer never sank below Fair. If the cynics should require another reason, the husband had everything his own way; his Ella doted upon him, as is not usual at that early period of matrimony, when the doting is generally on the other side. Whatever excursion he proposed, she always agreed that it would be delightful, and, what is better, she found it so. When it rained (for even during the other three days it did that) she made nothing of it, but in the most bewitching of waterproofs defied, or perhaps rejoiced, the elements. "It was no wonder," said Cecil, "that the naughty rain should try to come where it shouldn't, and the wicked wind should kiss her;" and as for the aborigines, though they are more accustomed to contemplate young brides than any other people on the face of the earth, they protested that no such beauty had been seen among them for many a summer.

Ella exhibited no will of her own at all (with which, strange to say, before marriage, even Cecil had occasionally credited her), and only once a passing whim, or fancy, and for

even that there had been a physical cause. The circumstance took place in the fourth week of their tour, when they were returning from the region of mere and mountain, by the southern route, which had brought them to Furness Abbey, where they had wisely proposed to stay the night. The spot is familiar to all lovers of the picturesque who are not hopelessly given up to the Continent, in all the length and breadth of which so fine a ruin is not to be found, associated with so well-fitting and harmonious an hotel. Not that the latter is ruinous, either in its appearance or its charges, but having been an old manor-house, and being built of somewhat similar materials to that of the Abbey, there is a congruity between them seldom seen. An antiquary or an archæologist can, at all events, put up at it without any shock to his sensibilities, and as he walks across the ancient garden that separates the two edifices (keeping his eyes quite shut, however—as he can always do when he pleases—against the neighbouring railway), steps from old times to older without a break.

Across this garden, after Cecil had secured rooms and ordered dinner—for he was never so blinded by romance as not to take those wise precautions—our happy pair had sauntered to

the Abbey, the blood-red walls of which were flushing deeper still beneath the evening sun. The ruin was bathed in quiet more complete than when the monks—whom their order bound to silence—had themselves inhabited it; not a sound was heard save that of the cawing rooks, for whom that "Valley of the Nightshade" was a home before a cowl had been seen there. Even to the eyes of Youth and Love there was something solemn and awe-inspiring, as they crossed the threshold of the arched doorway, in the look of that long transept, with grass for floor and sky for roof. The bliss of that tender time was for the moment shadowed by a sense of sublimity. As for Cecil, indeed, he scarce knew which was transept and which chancel, but Ella had all the requisite knowledge at her fingers' ends. She pointed out for him where the high altar had once stood, and the carved canopies of the sedilia, where abbot after abbot had listened to the awful tones of the *De Profundis.* Sacristy and chapel, refectory and hospitium, to him would have been undistinguishable ruins, but for the sweet voice that gave to each their uses.

"My darling," cried he, "you are a perfect guide-book, and as such (as Tom Moore says) must be bound in my arms!"

They were in the cloisters by that time, a spot

in one point of view opportune enough for an affectionate embrace, since it was lonely and free from all beholders; but if Cecil had any regard for the fitness of things, he would surely have hesitated to wake those venerable echoes with a kiss. For the cloisters had been the very place selected by the Cistercians for the meditations of their young monks, after having been admitted into the society, by requesting of the good abbot "the mercy of God and yours." The court in the centre was a burial-ground, where the gravestones were laid level, so that studious walkers should not be impeded, and at the same time might be drawn to serious thought.

Ella gravely pointed out these facts in reproving tones; but Cecil answered gaily, that he had read so much of the history of the Abbey, as informed him that at the time of its dissolution, Johannes Pele (abbas) had two wives; and another venerable member of the community, no fewer than five; so that kissing within the Abbey boundaries was not, after all, so very incongruous.

Ella could not but smile at this result of Cecil's archæological reading.

"I had no idea that you were such a student of the literature of the Church, my dear."

"Nor had I that I had married such an antiquary," he rejoined. "How comes it that

these architectural details are like A B C to you?"

"I was brought up among people who took a great interest in such things," replied Ella, carelessly. "Let us climb these stairs, and see the dormitories."

A broad but broken flight of stone steps led to the roofless upper story, where the very walls had gaps in them, and time had wrought an almost utter ruin.

"The monks must have had plenty of ventilation," observed Cecil, "even when there was a roof to their bedroom."

"Yes, they were no sybarites; they had straw mattresses, and a bolster that was but a foot and a half long; those who attended the choir rose at midnight to sing the divine offices. Their only relaxation was——"

"Hush!" said Cecil. "If your head is a pretty steady one, just look down here."

From where they stood the eye could command the roofless chapter-house, the only apartment otherwise in a tolerable state of preservation; its double row of channelled pillars was yet standing, and the daïs, or raised seat, on which the abbot and his monks sat during trials and on the private business of the monastery, still ran round three of its sides. This historical apart-

ment had now a tenant, in the person of an old gentleman, who was examining with great attention one of its lancet windows. He was a little weazen man, in a long frock-coat, with a wisp of silk round his neck and a broad-brimmed beaver hat upon his head.

"There's a fellow who might have lived in those old times himself, to look at him," whispered Cecil. "He's an antiquary, I'll bet a sovereign; perhaps you'd like to cultivate his acquaintance. By jingo! he would be like your uncle Gerard, if the Colonel got his clothes second-hand. What's the matter, my dear?"

"I feel faint, Cecil, and giddy."

Indeed, she looked pale enough, as she clung to his arm, with eyes averted from the scene to which he would have called her attention.

"That comes of looking down from such a height, my dear; I was a fool to suggest it; step carefully down the stairs, darling. You feel better now?"

They had descended to the transept.

"Not much, I am still faint."

"That is my fault; a judgment for eavesdropping that has missed the real offender—as judgments sometimes do—and fallen upon you. Let us get out of this blessed Abbey, which is mouldy enough to make anyone feel faint."

"It is not the Abbey, Cecil. To tell you the truth, I have not been well ever since I came into the valley itself, it is so shut in. They call it 'the Vale of Nightshade;' perhaps it's poisonous to some people."

"My dear Ella, what a horrible notion!"

"I daresay it's all fancy, but then, one can't help fancies."

"But you seemed so particularly well and jolly, my darling, only a few minutes ago."

"I tried to appear so, Cecil; to bear up on your account; but now I find myself quite unequal to it."

"You certainly look very queer, darling," said Cecil, with concern. "But you'll be better for your dinner. I've ordered it in the coffee-room, because I thought it would be more cheerful; and then you can compare notes upon the Abbey with that old Dryasdust. I'll ask the landlord what his name is."

"No, no," exclaimed Ella, hurriedly; "indeed, I could not eat dinner; and certainly not in the public room."

As they crossed the garden, Cecil observed how heavily she leant upon his arm, notwithstanding her evident desire to walk quickly. What struck him as even more significant was, that, when they got within doors, she at once

accepted his offer of a glass of sherry, though, as a rule, she took no wine.

The affair began to seem quite alarming, as sickness always does to one who knows nothing about it, and who is conscious of his incapacity to "do anything."

"I wonder whether you would think me very, very foolish," said Ella, perceiving what was in his mind, "if I were to propose going on to-night—say to Lancaster—I feel as though, if we remained here, I might be taken ill."

"Of course, we'll go on, if there's a train, love."

A glance at Bradshaw informed him that there was a train, which started within half an hour, and by that time they were ready for departure. The very idea of going seemed to have put to flight half Ella's sudden malady. She still felt "queer," however, she said, and chilly, and wrapped herself about in cloak and shawl, as though it were winter-time. As they crossed the hall that led to the railway platform, the old antiquary entered it from the garden. He had a note-book in his hand, but did not appear to have made any original discoveries, to judge by his countenance, which was grave, even to melancholy.

"I think that poor old buffer had better come

away with us," whispered Cecil, "for the place seems to disagree with him too. You might in charity have shown him your pretty face, my dear, instead of muffling yourself up like a beauty of the harem."

Cecil was different from the majority of bridegrooms in not being jealous of his wife's charms. He took a pride, rather, in the admiration they extorted from others.

Ella answered nothing, but only moved on more quickly, and as she did so Cecil felt her tremble on his arm.

Once in the train, however, she soon recovered, and, after passing Ulverston, became quite herself again. The loveliness of Morecambe Bay, on whose perilous sands so many have taken leave of life with the fairest of earth's prospects spread before them, as though to mock their misery, seemed to kindle her enthusiasm; or was it that she strove, by a constant stream of talk, to drown her husband's recollection of her recent strange behaviour? If the latter, she was not successful, for at supper that night, seeing her quite well and strong again, he began to rally her upon her mysterious indisposition.

"I don't believe it was the Furness air, my dear, that so affected you. I suspect it was the sight of that old fogey."

"What old fogey?"

"There, now I'm sure of it," answered Cecil, laughing. "The idea of your pretending not to know what I mean; you turned faint when you looked at him, and you trembled when he looked at you. If I were of a jealous disposition, and that respectable antiquary were about three-quarters of a century younger than he looked, I should be really inclined to think that he had been an old love of yours."

"Then you would be very much mistaken, Cecil," returned she, gravely, and with no answering smile; "for I have never had—and never can have while life is left to me—any other love save you."

A reply which would have satisfied the most sceptical of bridegrooms; and scepticism—of that sort at least—was not to be reckoned among the many faults of Cecil Landon.

CHAPTER II.

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

CIRCUMSTANCES mould our friendships almost as much as they form them. "Though time may divide us, and oceans may part," is a very pretty sentiment; but it is also true that when ropes' ends have not met one another for a long time, the old splicing does not come so easy. There are knots and kinks that did not used to be of old—or if they were, for which we could more readily make allowance—which render the strands of long-parted friendship difficult to renew, as was once summed up by Colonel Juxon thus succinctly: "When a fellow hasn't seen a fellow for a devil of a time, it stands to reason that he can't care twopence about him?" The statement may be a little exaggerated, but, in the main, the Colonel was correct. The marriage of Cecil Landon, for example, by separating

him from his old companion, Hugh Darall, did, doubtless, weaken the bonds of friendship between them. New associations, new companionships, sprang up around each, which the other no longer shared, and to some extent, though unconsciously, estranged them from one another. The *vice versâ* of this process, it is true, by no means holds good; you may meet a man every day, as one does meet one's club acquaintances, some of whom one certainly likes no better on that account; but even these may become more *en rapport* and sympathetic with one than one's once true friend who remains at a distance. Not, indeed — to revert again to the case in point—that Woolwich was far from London, or that the difficulties of the route between these localities were very formidable; but Woolwich is out of the way of a London man, as Cecil had become, and Darall was more or less the slave of duty, and could not run up to town when he pleased. It was not only business that employed the junior partner of the house of Landon and Son. He attended at the office with punctuality, for he considered himself tacitly pledged to do so; but the work, though light enough—as all business work is which is not absolute drudgery—was distasteful to him. His own apartment was snug enough, and very

superior to any barrack-room that would have fallen to his lot, had he remained in the army; but the unaccustomed loneliness affected his spirits. The hours hung heavily on hand with him; for though his attention was loyally given to matters of business whenever demanded, no feeling of interest accompanied it. Sometimes the affairs of the firm took him into the country—generally to the West of England—and that was more disagreeable to him than all. When his mission for the day was then accomplished, there was no companionship, no amusement, in which he could lose the recollection of it until the morrow. In London he erased the memory of the tedious day by pleasures that might almost be termed dissipations.

"Hang it, Ella," he would say, on coming home, in those early days, when discontent was not as yet ripe, "I have been half bored to death in Wethermill Street; let us have a lark somewhere."

Whereupon they would go to the play. Ella was ready enough for gaiety, but would have been equally ready to spend a quiet evening in her husband's company; her whole aim in life was to please him, and for a time she succeeded wonderfully. For though beauty, cleverness, and personal devotion must needs succeed in

winning the affections of any man, they cannot always retain them. And herein was manifested what had been really amiss in the union of these two young people; not that they were too young—for that is a matter to be decided upon in each individual case, and does not admit of generalisation—but that their engagement had been too short. The gamut of the human mind comprehends other things beside love-notes. These two had interchanged together smiles, kisses, vows, and all the paraphernalia of the most virtuous attachment, but they had not interchanged thoughts; and if they had been a little less precipitate they would have discovered the reason—namely, that they had not a thought in common. In some cases this is of small consequence—we have seen very happy pairs without a thought between them; and again, others, equally well satisfied with one another, where all the thinking has been upon one side; but in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Landon, junior, there were thoughts on both sides, and unhappily they were antagonistic. Cecil was a clever fellow, genial, and even humorous, and possessed very attractive manners; but his character was essentially conventional, or, lest we should do wrong to the great majority of our fellow-creatures in so speaking, let us rather say that his opinions were so. He

had never given himself the trouble to form any of his own, but had received them at second hand, from the most commonplace sources. His father had sent him to Eton—curiously enough, as people said who thought themselves acquainted with the elder Landon. He had, indeed, no belief in the virtues of the public-school system; but being told on every side that it was due to his motherless boy, heir as he was to a considerable position in the world, that he should have "all the advantages of education"—by which, as usual, was meant fashionable ones—he had so far given way to the advice of others as to place him at that aristocratic seminary. In doing so, he was only giving a sop to Cerberus, inasmuch as he had determined not to enter the lad at either of the universities, but to transfer him straight from school to the house in Wethermill Street. How that plan ended we are aware. The training at Eton did not prove favourable to mercantile pursuits, and had also fostered many opinions that were distasteful in his father's eyes.

What was of much more consequence, they were distinctly opposed to those of his wife. Ella was a democrat, and something of an "*esprit fort*." Ladies of the like views are found in plenty nowadays, but, at the time of which we are writing, they were so rare as to be, by some,

considered monstrosities. Cecil had a decorous attachment for religious orthodoxy, which only stopped at the church door; he did not like attending public worship, and therefore he did not go; but he thought it ill-judged, unfeminine, and what is now called "bad form," that his wife should do the like. In politics and social matters he was content that things should remain as they were—not that he had studied the matter, or even thought about it, but his notion was that radicals were not gentlemen, and should be avoided; as to their being ladies, such an idea had never yet entered his head.

Now Ella was an "advanced thinker," though not exactly of the Manchester type, and, what was worse, she was an advanced speaker. What she thought she had no scruple about putting into words; and not a little had she fluttered the doves of Bayswater—even the male ones—at various dinner-parties by so doing.

"Upon my life, Landon, your wife is a—very remarkable woman," was a confidential observation that had been made to Cecil more than once, when his host had come to his end of the table at dessert, having previously had Ella on his right hand during the repast; and the observation had not been taken as a compliment. She was so beautiful and so intelligent—for intel-

ligence is comparative, and Bayswater dinner-parties are sometimes a little dull—that no man, except her husband, was annoyed by her peculiarities; but they offended the women, who resented them by pitying Cecil, and Cecil did not like to be pitied.

"I cannot think, Ella, where you get hold of such ideas," observed he, upon one occasion, when they were, for a wonder, passing the evening alone, and at home. "They are really not becoming; Lady Green was quite shocked by what you said to her last night about the Bishops."

"I am sorry for that," said Ella, dryly.

"Well, of course, you are; she is a person of position, and her good opinion is worth having."

"Indeed, that is not my view of it. Why, *I* was sorry that I failed to convince her. Persons of intelligence I generally find agree with me, but if I could persuade the Lady Greens—that is the million—that would, indeed, be a triumph."

"I beg to state, Ella, so far as the matter in debate between you and her ladyship was concerned, that I also belong to the million."

Ella took no notice of this declaration of faith, but remarked, quietly, "I wish you wouldn't

say 'her ladyship,' Cecil—it is a term only to be used by servants."

"I think I know how to express myself, thank you, without any Hints on Etiquette," answered Cecil, biting his lip. "The fact is you are jealous of everyone in a position higher than your own."

"Jealous of Lady Green?" inquired Ella, contemptuously.

"Yes, because she goes down to dinner before you. There is no limit to the envy of some women."

"There is to their patience," answered Ella, rising from her chair. "I will not listen to such words, Cecil."

"You bring them on yourself, my dear," he went on in less antagonistic tones. "It is no pleasure to me to speak them. But I can't help hearing—and feeling—what people say about you, and your opinions."

"What people?"

"Well, very respectable people. It is all very well for a man of genius to set himself up in opposition to established notions—though even he is thought a fool for his pains—but in a woman it is not becoming. A woman ought to be——"

"Pretty and plump," interrupted Ella; "and to have no opinions of her own."

"I was not going to put it that way, but you have described a very nice sort of woman," said Cecil. "You may say, perhaps, that my father holds pretty much the same views as yourself." She shook her head. "Well, at all events, something akin to them; but in his mouth one makes allowance for them. He has not been brought up as you have been. You learnt nothing of the kind from your Uncle Gerard, nor at home, as I understand, and, indeed, I know from what occurred when we were at Furness, that you were brought up in a very different school."

"How do you mean, 'from what occurred at Furness?'" said Ella, in a tone no longer defiant; the flush of anger, too, had suddenly faded from her cheek.

"I refer to the knowledge you exhibited with respect to antiquities, and so on, which you said you had been brought up to study. I suppose those who taught you—your father, for example—being themselves attached to that kind of lore, could scarcely have been Radicals."

"My father was not a Radical," said Ella, simply.

"Of course not; he was a gentleman, no doubt, like your uncle—though you never speak about him."

"I thought——" she hesitated. Her voice was not only gentle now, but conciliatory. "I thought it would not interest you, Cecil."

"Don't say that, dear; anything that interests you would interest me, but I have never sought to pry into what you wished to be silent about. I have never interfered with you in any way, as you know; but to-night I have just said a word—not out of season, if that means too early—about the too open expression of your opinions. They annoy me, Ella."

"Then I will endeavour to restrain them, darling," answered she, submissively. "I believe in them, Cecil, as few people do, perhaps, but I hold them as nothing when compared with your affection. You don't feel angry with me any longer, do you, Cecil?"

"Not a bit, my pet. The tears are in your eyes; you feel hipped and moped. Let us go to the opera; we shall be in lots of time for the ballet."

"Not to-night, dear; I feel so tired."

"Very good; then I think I'll just take a stroll by myself."

The quarrels of married folks have not always the effect proverbially attributed to those of lovers. They shake the pillars of domestic peace, and loosen them, even though they may

not bring them down. The disagreement of the young couple was over for the time; but it left its traces on them both; and upon Cecil especially. He had conquered in that passage of arms, but the victory had not been obtained so readily as he anticipated, nor in the wished-for manner. He had even a vague impression that his wife had intellectually got the better of him, and had given in to him from some fanciful scruple; certainly not from any adhesion to the orthodox doctrine (for wives) of passive obedience.

It is uninteresting, and far from agreeable, to have to describe, or peruse, the record of domestic quarrels. Let it suffice to say that they became very frequent between our young couple; and varied from "the tiff" unnecessary to "the squabble" unavoidable. The system of going out o' nights to cure the spleen is not adapted to make home happy; if a married couple love one another, let them rather send in to a friendly neighbour, the same message which (as he hopes to be saved) was once sent in to the present writer: "Mr. and Mrs. A.'s compliments, and they will be much obliged if Mr. B. would step in for the evening, as they feel so very dull."

Moreover, Cecil altered his system for a

still worse one; he remedied the home tedium by going out to enjoy himself alone, leaving Ella behind him. Wives, especially when newly married, object to this. It was a widow who had dearly loved her husband who confessed that there was one comfort she derived from the very fact of her bereavement: "She always knew now (or thought she knew) where dear John was o' nights."

Ella did not always know where dear Cecil was. It is not to be supposed that she loved him less because she was racked by a vague jealousy, but she was angry with him, and showed it. And, alas! Cecil loved her less in consequence.

"Don't you think it would be pleasant to have Gracie up from Woolwich to stay with us, Ella?" he had once suggested.

"It would be very pleasant for you, no doubt," she answered, with bitter significance.

"Good heavens, what do you mean? Do you suppose I want the girl here? Are you jealous?"

He laughed in such a wholesome way, that, had Ella entertained any such preposterous idea of the fascinations of her young friend, she would have had the wisdom to dismiss it.

"No, I am not jealous of Gracie, Cecil; you would be glad to have her here on my account, I know, in order that you might go out when

you please, without even the slight scruple that you still sometimes feel at leaving me quite alone."

"You never need be alone, my dear, I'm sure," replied he, gently, "for no woman had ever, and deservedly, such troops of friends."

She raised the book she had depressed to look him in the face, while she made her last remark, and once more pretended to be interested in its pages; she did not deign to answer him. The suggestion that "troops of friends" would supply his place with her had cut her to the heart.

"You are determined to misunderstand me," said he, in the aggrieved tone that husbands use who know themselves to be in the wrong. "A man can't be tied to his wife's apron-strings, especially if he is in business. Do you suppose I like having to run up and down the country, away from you and everything pleasant? Next month, for example, I have to go to the West of England. I don't complain; but since it was for your sake that I have been dipped in the same vat as my father, I don't think it becomes you, Ella, of all people, to twit me with my absences from home."

"You know very well that I was not referring to business affairs, Cecil. If you had been a

soldier, I should have to lose you for even longer, and more often. It is cruel of you to imagine (as you do) that even Gracie's company would make up to me for the absence of my husband, and still less the society of such friends as you refer to."

"I am sure they are very nice people—some of them, at least—and you seem to me to enjoy yourself when amongst them. I heard you say that you were looking forward to the Groveses' picnic at Virginia Water, for instance, with particular pleasure."

"And so I am, Cecil, because, for once, you are going with me."

"My dear Ella, don't say 'for once,'" answered he, tenderly. "You know how busy we have been in the City all the spring, so that I could never get away early. It is only because we had such a long notice from Lady Elizabeth that I was able to promise. Don't be cross with me, darling."

She could not be cross with him when he spoke like that. Even if he did not mean it, if that pleading and affectionate tone—to which her very heartstrings vibrated—was not at all genuine, yet, since he gave himself the trouble to use it, she must needs be happy and forgiving.

"And what do you really think about Gracie,

darling?" inquired he. "It seems to me it would be a real charity to give her a holiday; I daresay that old Commissary has never so much as taken her to the play in her life. We must begin very quietly with her—the Monument, and Madame Tussaud's, and that sort of thing."

"But, dear Cecil, she will never leave her mother. When we last went down to Woolwich—and a long time ago Uncle Gerard complains it was—poor Mrs. Ray was too ill to see even me. She has lived much longer than was expected, but it must all be over soon. Then, indeed, it will be, as you say, a real charity to invite Gracie."

"But then she will not be able to go anywhere, poor girl," said Cecil, sincerely commiserating a calamity which precluded amusements.

"Well, I'll send her an invitation to-morrow, darling, to please you," said Ella, "though I don't think anything will come of it; and suppose we ask Mr. Darall too."

"Just as you like, Ella; only isn't it rather hard lines to ask a fellow to meet a girl he loves, when the affair can't come off; and, besides, are not two people that are spooney on one another rather apt to be bores in a house?"

CHAPTER III.

ELLA SCENTS DANGER.

NOTWITHSTANDING the swiftness of our modern postal system, letters still "cross" one another. Nay, the very rapidity of our means of communication has begotten a new contradiction; for it sometimes happens that one receives a telegram which tells us of the death of a sick friend from whom one afterwards gets a letter. A strange experience it is to take such in one's hands, written but twelve hours ago, perchance, and feel that the thoughts therein contained the writer can no longer think; that the plans are valueless, since they were designed for this world; that one is listening to the words of a dead man.

On the very night that Ella despatched her note to Gracie, expressing the desire of her husband and herself that she should visit them, and painting their little schemes for her amuse-

ment in the most seductive terms—albeit she had little expectation that they would move her to leave her mother—Gracie had written to Ella, to tell her that her mother was dead. She received the note the next morning at breakfast, and knew at once, by its deep black edging, what had happened.

"See—poor Mrs. Ray is gone at last," said she, holding it up to her husband.

"Poor soul! it must be a happy release for all parties," observed Cecil. "One cannot but be glad upon Gracie's account, as it will permit her to enjoy life a little; she has had but a dull time of it hitherto. My dear Ella, how white you look! I should have thought your young friend had been too sensible to write upon such a matter in a harrowing way."

"I cannot help being touched at Gracie's grief, darling."

"But you don't look touched so much as terrified."

And, indeed, such was the literal fact. There was not a tear in Ella's eyes; but her face had that frozen look which accompanies excessive fear.

"She writes very sensibly," continued she, taking no notice of her husband's remark; "you can read it if you please, dear, for yourself."

As she handed him the letter, she dropped a slip of paper it contained into her lap.

"I don't much care," said he, "for reading about this sort of thing, my dear: 'No pain,' 'sensible to the last,' 'love to yourself.' Well, that is very satisfactory. She will, of course, come up to us, as soon as she feels herself equal to going about and enjoying herself."

"That will not be for some time to come, if I know her, dear."

"Well, you ought to know her, if anyone does; but I should have thought she was not one to 'grizzle' over things that couldn't be helped. The presence of the Commissary, too, will hardly be an encouragement to the sentimental emotions. I am quite sorry to see you so cut up, my dear."

"It is so sudden, Cecil; and just as I had written to her about theatres and amusements too! And the poor old lady was so fond of me."

"And quite right too; it did credit to her discernment."

There was silence for some minutes, during which Cecil read *The Times*, and Ella turned and twisted the little note, that still lay upon her lap, a score of different ways.

"By jingo, here's more news from Woolwich!" cried he, suddenly.

"What news?" inquired Ella, in faint tones, but with a certain anxiety in them, nevertheless.

"Well, perhaps you don't recollect him; I introduced him to you once, however, upon the Common—one Whymper, a cadet. I remember you thought him rather good-looking, which astonished me. He was a wretched sort of creature, and yet—what luck some people have! —he has come in for fifty thousand pounds. He has only to change his name, it seems, to Hobson. It is not a pretty one; but what signifies about names?"

"They are not of much consequence, indeed," said Ella.

"Ah, that is one of your radical notions. I don't agree with you there; but a fellow like Whymper might change his name for anything —Cavendish, Howard, Plantagenet—and yet be no better than he was; and Hobson can't make him any worse. He has done it too, in due form: 'By Her Majesty's Letters Patent,' &c. I'll bet a sovereign he doesn't stop at 'the Shop' another week. We shall have him up in London as a 'great catch' this season, you may depend upon it. It will be a case of who will be 'Hobson's choice!' If he were a better fellow—and since poor Darall's getting her seems out of the question—we would put him in the way of

Gracie. I should like to see the Commissary making his terms with Whymper-Hobson for the transfer. My young friend used to be a precious screw."

Thus he ran on while Ella listened, or seemed to listen, with a loving smile. She was always amused by Cecil's light, bright talk; but amusement was not now the expression of her face; it was rather conciliation, the expression—if one might say so without offence—which Gentleman-cadet Whymper himself had been wont to wear when seeking to gain Landon's favour, or mitigate his resentment. And yet, for certain, she had done naught that day to anger him.

With her own hands she helped him with his overcoat as he took his departure for the City, and even lit his cigar for him.

"Your taper fingers are just the things, my dear, for that work," said he, in gracious acknowledgment.

"I mistrust your compliments," answered she, laughing, "though I smile at your wit. Now, mind, you are to be home to dinner at seven."

"Oh yes, darling—unless I should telegraph. There is just a possibility of my being obliged to ask young Magenta—the governor wishes me to be civil to him, and he may come up to-day

from the West, on business—to dine at the club."

Ella knew that Cecil would not have been seen entertaining Moses Magenta at his club upon any consideration, but she only smiled still more sweetly.

"Dine abroad, or at home, Cecil, just as you prefer," said she. "Whichever best pleases you will always best please me, darling."

He kissed her and patted her cheek in complacent approval. Almost any other husband would have had his suspicions aroused by having such a licence accorded him for the future, which seemed to revive the days of Papal indulgence. But Cecil's face only exhibited that gracious serenity which betokens a mind at ease with all things, but especially with itself. If the British nation should have unanimously agreed that, notwithstanding the claims of the reigning family, it would set them aside in order to have the advantage of being governed by Mr. Cecil Landon, it is our belief that that young gentleman would have been in nowise astonished at the selection, but would have calmly and politely declined the designed favour, on account of the trouble to himself involved in such an otherwise reasonable arrangement.

Yet this, perhaps, was the first occasion on which Ella had ever wished her Cecil otherwise than he was in character, for notwithstanding all their disputes, and matters about which, beyond all dispute, she had a right to complain, she loved him still with passionate devotion. His very self-consciousness and confidence in his own attractions were not displeasing to her, since they corroborated her own opinions of his merits; but she did wish, just for once, that he had expressed surprise at her concession about his dining out, and inquired, however jocosely, the reason of such unwifely acquiescence. If he had given her ever so small an opportunity in the way of interrogation, she would have taken advantage of it to tell him things which, without inquiry, he must needs know some day. But the door had closed upon him, he had not been told, and the telling was yet to come. And it must come soon, now. Other people, known to themselves, had got hold of the scent, and the revelation had surely better be made to her husband by her own lips, than by theirs.

The slip of paper which had been enclosed in Gracie's letter had referred to this. "At such a time as this, dearest Ella, it is scarcely fit that I should write upon any subject save one; but if my dear mother could speak she would

say, I know, 'The dead are at peace already; see you to the peace of the living.' There is some scandalous story afloat here respecting your marriage. Of course, if I could get about, you could rely upon me to deny it; but for the present, as my lips are closed, I think it right you should know of this; and that Colonel Juxon should know; that things are said about you—I will not sully my pen by saying what things—that ought to be contradicted."

For the last twelve months—that is, for the whole time she had been married, and for weeks before—Ella had been expecting some such announcement as this; had been well persuaded that the blow must fall, sooner or later, and yet had gone on, buoyed up by a baseless hope. Every day that passed without discovery had swelled that hope, until she had almost believed it possible that discovery might not take place at all. It is the way of all people who trust to the chapter of accidents to conceal a matter—the murder that they know must out. At first they feel that there is no escape; then, as time passes, they begin to flatter themselves that the peril is growing less; and when a long period has elapsed they become secure, and sometimes audacious. To this last state of misplaced confidence Ella had

never attained, but she had reached the intermediate condition, and this sudden blow was therefore a severe one.

"I was wrong, I was wrong," she moaned, "to listen to my uncle, and not to tell all to Cecil before I became his wife. He loved me then—Heaven help me if he does not love me now—he was full of passion and devotion then; that was the time to tell him. He would have married me all the same, and in the way I wished. If he be so fond of truth he would have respected my oath, and not compelled me to break it. Why, why did I not tell him?" She put the question as though to another person, and leaning her forehead on her hands, seemed to await the reply. "I remember now," she went on, after a pause, "Uncle Gerard said that it would invalidate the marriage. How could my telling Cecil beforehand have done that? I was deceived most cruelly. My uncle said that out of spite and hate; I ought to have known him better. But stay, there was the lawyer's opinion! Perhaps, if I tell Cecil *now*, our marriage is invalid?"

She started up as though she had been stung. Her face was for the moment no longer beautiful; despair and rage had transformed it.

"No," she cried, putting her hair back from her face with a passionate gesture, "if there is justice in heaven such things can never be. Even a fiend—and Uncle Gerard is not a fiend—would never have permitted me to run that risk. 'Perhaps, if another told him, it would be no matter,' says the law, but only if *I* told him. Yet it is clear I must tell him. Someone will do it, if I do not, and that soon; will it be to-day or to-morrow, or the next day? Whom can I consult, without committing myself? The old man is my friend; I will tell him all, and ask him to break it to his son. And yet, how can I? when he himself advised me, while there was yet time, to have no secrets from Cecil. And yet Cecil has secrets from me."

Here the mobile face changed once again, and became hard and resolute.

"Yes, I know it; he has been false to me, and thinks of it but lightly. And what have *I* done at the worst? He has no right to punish me, even though I do deserve it. When he comes to know, I will say, 'Well, what then? I have deceived you, Cecil; I confess it, but I have not wronged you. Lay your hand upon your heart—the heart that should be mine alone—and tell me truly, you who are the soul of truth, it seems—have

not you wronged *me?'* Then he will deny it, upon his honour; that is what men do."

She began to pace the room with rapid steps, as some do to prevent themselves from thinking, as others do to encourage thought. Presently a cab stopped at the door. Even that alarmed her, notwithstanding her just uttered words. Could Cecil have already heard the scandal that was afloat at Woolwich concerning her, and come to tax her with it? When she saw, through the blind, that it was his father, she experienced a sense of relief, and then again of oppression; such as is begotten by an opportunity one desires, and yet of which one fears to take advantage.

"So your mate has flown already, Ella, has he?" said the old gentleman, after an affectionate greeting. "I thought I would take him on with me in my cab, since I have a cab. I know he is much too fine to ride by the 'bus."

"He sometimes does," said Ella, apologetically.

"Yes, sometimes rides by it on horseback," snapped the old gentleman. "Young men didn't go to business that way in my time."

"It makes him so uncomfortable to travel inside," pleaded Ella.

"Then why don't he go outside?"

"It's the sitting sideways that disagrees with him."

"Then let him go on the box. Much better men, much 'warmer' men—men with ten thousand a year, ma'am—are not ashamed to do it."

"Perhaps it's because they are warmer, Mr. Landon," answered Ella, simply. "Cecil finds it so cold."

"Go along with you, you little witch," laughed the old gentleman. "You are incorrigible. I am sorry I missed him, because I wanted to have a talk with him, in your presence, upon a certain matter which has only turned up this morning."

"In my presence?" echoed Ella, a cold shiver creeping over her.

"Yes; it is a subject in which you are concerned as much as he, though it has only reference to business. A telegram has come, telling me we have lost our managing man down in the West, where our operations are greatly extending. Some responsible person must be found to live at Wellborough at least three months in the year: it would be better indeed if he did so altogether. Of course, such an individual could be got, but it would save a deal of money if Cecil undertook the matter himself. If he goes, of course you must go; and I came to

ask your opinion about it. You could come up to town for the season, if your heart is really set on that sort of thing; and, in fact, I should not like to lose you for more, say, than half the year. Your income would be improved by it, though, till the nursery comes to be filled, you can scarcely want more money. I daresay you will find the country a little dull at first; but, on the other hand, you will have more of Cecil's society. What do you think about it—that I may know what to say, so far as you are concerned, when I come to talk to your husband?"

"I am quite ready to do what you and Cecil wish, dear Mr. Landon." As a matter of fact the proposal charmed her. When the old gentleman had remarked that she would have more of her husband's society—he was referring, as she was well aware, to business hours—Mr. Landon did not know how much of his time, especially his evenings, Cecil spent away from home. There would be no such attractions for him, Ella reflected, in the country as there were in town; and, more than all, they would be out of the way of gossip. It was a slender chance, but still there was a chance, that that piece of Woolwich scandal might die where it was born, and never follow them to a distant home. She could not contradict it, as Gracie suggested, because it was

true; but there was just this "pull" in her favour, that even her enemies—and she had many such among the ladies of that garrison-town—must needs take it for granted, even supposing this choice morsel of tea-table tattle were founded on fact, that her husband knew of it.

"You are a good wife," cried the old gentleman, seizing both her hands; "just the sort of wife for a man of business; and if Cecil behaves badly to you, I'll cut him off with a shilling."

"Should we have to leave London soon?" inquired Ella, with as much indifference as she could assume, though what she would have dearly liked him to reply was, "Yes, to-morrow."

"Well, if you go at all, it should be almost at once. I don't wish to be unreasonable, my dear. I have heard of the great picnic that is to be at Virginia Water next week, and understand the impossibility of interfering with that arrangement; but if you could contrive to leave town immediately after it——"

"So far as I am concerned, dear Mr. Landon," interrupted Ella, "I am prepared to give up the picnic."

"What, the Groveses', with Lady Elizabeth, and 'really the very best people,' as your friend Lady Green calls them?"

"I don't care for 'the best people,' nor

yet for Lady Green, twopence," answered Ella, laughing.

"My own sentiments, and my own expression," exclaimed the old gentleman, delightedly. "Cecil says, 'If you would only make it silver, father, and say one fourpenny piece,' but I am a stickler for the truth. So is your husband, I am bound to say. The clerks who are straightforward all adore him, but if one ever deceives him he has to go forthwith."

"But that is very hard," said Ella, faintly.

"Well, yes, it is hard. But then young people are always hard—except where they are uncommon soft. And, after all, it's a good plan, for one deception involves a score of others in order to make it safe, and so the whole character of the man becomes rotten. However, I didn't come here to moralise, and I must see Cecil at once. Now that his better-half is on my side he will be easily persuaded, no doubt. You have behaved like a trump, Ella, and I look upon you less as a daughter-in-law than as a daughter. God bless you, my dear!"

He was out of the house and in the cab in a moment. Her pleading looks, her yearning eyes, had escaped his observation; he had only seen a pretty face, which had smiled a ready and somewhat unexpected acquiescence in his views.

Perhaps it would have been all the same had he been less absorbed with the business in hand and more observant. His remarks about the clerks had chilled her. And surely in this projected change of residence there was a new hope of safety, a less necessity for confessing all.

CHAPTER IV.

PROCRASTINATION.

There is this peculiarity in the misfortunes of mankind, which also renders them more bitter—namely, that they generally come from quarters wholly unexpected. We may look for a fire to break out in our new conservatory, heated by the very last new apparatus, and naturally, therefore, arousing apprehensions, the case being only mitigated by the knowledge that we are insured; but what does happen is a hail-storm that smashes the place to shivers, and for the damage arising from which catastrophe we receive no compensation. And thus it was with Ella Landon in her present state of anxiety and alarm. Her speculations for the "fall" took every direction, save that her husband would refuse to remove his residence to the West of England. Even in that case she would have had

cause enough for fear for her secret, but she did think that, so far, she was safe. He had complained of the gloom of the City and of the confinement of his London life, so far as it was associated with his business and his home; had often, too, expressed his partiality for the country, and, though it was true that was on account of the opportunities it offered for sporting, and the shooting season was at this period almost over, yet the immediate change was understood to be only temporary; in future he might divide his time as he pleased, and, in fact, possess two houses, one in town and one in the country. Under these circumstances, with the additional advantages of having an increased income, and of giving pleasure to his father, Ella had never contemplated that Cecil would oppose himself to the new arrangement. And yet he did so point-blank. He would run down for a day or two to the West of England, and put matters in hand there, he said, but make it a place of residence he would not.

The old gentleman was very angry at his obstinacy, as Ella gathered from Cecil's manner, who had evidently been made angry also. She did not see him till the following morning—if between 2 and 3 A.M. can be called so—when he came home from dining with Mr.

Magenta at the club. That is what he would have had his wife believe, at least; and it was not a time for her to express disbelief. She had her own thoughts, and they were not pleasant ones, about that matter; but other things were just then more important and more pressing. The incident, however, caused her to regard the idea of a residence in the country, where folks do not keep such very late hours, and there are no clubs, with even greater favour than before. She was resolved to make a fight for it, though, if possible, not to let him see she was fighting; and, above all, she must not lose her temper, or cause him to lose his. If the discovery she feared must needs take place, she was resolved that it should happen under the most favourable conditions for forgiveness, and when her husband and herself were on the best of terms.

But to fence with an adversary whom one is not to prick with the foil, is to contend at a disadvantage indeed; and other things were against her also. In the first place, thinking he would not be so very late, and wishing to discuss the question of change of residence with him, she had sat up for Cecil, and he resented that as a reproach, as husbands will, especially when they feel that they deserve reproach.

"How foolish it is of you, Ella, to fatigue

yourself in this way. I told you I might not be home to dinner; and when a man is dining with one, one can't turn him out of the club till he chooses to go."

Under ordinary circumstances Ella would perhaps have answered, "Can't one?" a little mournfully, for she was well aware that no human creature could have persuaded Cecil to stay anywhere when he had a mind to come away. He would have excused himself in the most pleasant way in the world, on the score of the necessity of rising early the next morning, or would even have laughingly laid the burthen upon Ella herself: "I am so hen-pecked, you know, that I daren't stay;" but he would certainly have come away.

"I am not tired, darling, and I don't blame you," replied she, sweetly. "Of course, I was anxious to know what decision you had come to with regard to your father's proposition as to Wellborough. I assured him that, so far as I was concerned——"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Cecil, curtly; "he told me you didn't care which way it was."

"But, indeed, I didn't say that, darling; I said I should like to live at Wellborough very much."

"I confess I can't sympathise with your taste

then. It's the dullest, dreariest town in England. I would as soon be buried alive as live there."

"Oh, Cecil, I thought you were so fond of the country? I know, when we were at the Lakes——"

"Oh, that was very different," interrupted Cecil, with a laugh that was not intended to be a mocking one, but which to her ears sounded so. "Every place was delightful then; but one isn't always on one's honeymoon."

"That is true," sighed Ella. "Still, there would be hunting and shooting, I suppose, at Wellborough?"

"Not a bit of it. There would be nothing to do—but dye."

"There would certainly be fishing, because the town stands on a river."

"In which our works, it is complained, have poisoned all the fish; but, at all events, I hate fishing."

"But your father seemed to have set his heart upon it so, dear."

"My dear Ella, I think I have done enough, and to spare, to please my father already."

"Oh, Cecil," said she, with tender reproach.

"Nay, I don't mean in marrying you, my dear. I did that, of course, to please myself; but in leaving the army. In doing that I did a

good deal in the way of filial obedience, as both he and you are well aware. It is impossible to shape one's life entirely in accordance with the wish of another—especially if one has no wishes in common with him. I don't deny that the governor is very good to me."

"And very fond of you, Cecil."

"I believe that; but that feeling is not so contrary to nature as to be set down so very largely to his credit. There's a good deal of nonsense talked about the obligations one is under to the 'author of our being,' as the moralists call one's papa; but the probability is, he didn't become so upon our account. I know you have an exaggerated notion of filial duty, and I have no doubt you were the best of daughters, but——"

"I was not that, Cecil, Heaven knows," interrupted Ella, gravely.

"Well, one would really think so from the way you preach to me sometimes. For my part, I think the governor is very unreasonable; and, I must say, I didn't like the way he threw you at my head, as it were, this morning, saying how little you cared for society, and how you loved quiet, and that it was all my fault that we couldn't live at Wellborough."

"I am very sorry, dear; your father must

have misunderstood me. I don't remember saying anything of the kind."

"Well, he said that you didn't care for the Groveses' picnic, for example, which I have heard you say, myself, you were looking forward to with the greatest pleasure. It would almost seem that you had two faces, Ella, one for him and one for me."

"I told your father that I didn't care for the picnic, so far as the Groveses and the other people were concerned; but I do care for it since you are to be there, Cecil. That was what I meant."

"Then the governor got hold of the wrong end of the stick, that's all. It's not worth arguing about—especially as the matter's settled—and I am sorry to say it's very late." And with that Cecil walked into his dressing-room, and closed the door with rather a sharp click.

There were moments during that interview when poor Ella had been sorely tempted to show her annoyance, but she had restrained herself. She had now the mortification of reflecting that, whatever she had gained by her forbearance, she had certainly not gained her point.

The subject of a change of residence was not again adverted to between Ella and her husband, but it was necessary to talk of Wellborough. Cecil was going down thither, it was not quite

settled for how long, and it was only natural, she thought, that she should accompany him. She had been with him before upon his business trips, though not always; but those on which she had not accompanied him had been much briefer than this one was likely to be. At first she even took it for granted that she was to go, nor did he absolutely forbid it. But it was clear that he had no intention, or at all events no wish, to take her.

"Things will be very uncomfortable," he said, "down at Wellborough. The man who is giving us all this trouble is still there, though he has accepted another situation; we cannot therefore occupy our own house, but should have to go to an hotel. And I should think an hotel at Wellborough would be hateful."

"I do not mind discomfort, so long as I am with you, Cecil," she had said, and meant it with all her heart. But he had still denied her, basing his objections upon the same ground.

"You can't imagine what it would be," he said; "moreover, it will be an excellent opportunity while I am away to ask poor Gracie to come and stay with you."

It was the second time that he had hinted, or seemed to do so, that Gracie's company could make up to her for his absence, and it had a still more painful effect, like a blow on an old wound.

But this time she did not reproach him. She had resolved not to do so, whatever he said; and this time there was no need to oppose the proposition, since she would be glad enough to receive Gracie, while he was away, that she might make her at least safe with respect to her secret. But the wound rankled for all that. Moreover, the impression remained with her that, notwithstanding all her patience and efforts at conciliation, and even her loving attempts to win him, that she had not brought herself nearer to her husband. Was his love for her then really weakened, while her love for him remained as strong as ever, nay stronger—or rather more feverishly strong, at the bare idea that she might come to lose his love? It was not, perhaps, really weakened. There are subtle influences which make themselves felt under such circumstances, however we strive to veil their presence. The possession of her secret, and the fact that she was endeavouring to ingratiate herself with him for a purpose, no doubt affected her pleadings unknown to herself. He never, indeed, suspected that she had any such design, but there was something in her manner that failed to please, or at all events to attain her object. During the honeymoon (as he had said) she might have succeeded.

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Having satisfactorily disposed of this "unpleasantness," and got his way, one would have imagined that Cecil would have been in high good-humour. But this was far from being the case. It was not, indeed, in his nature to be downright sulky; but he took it in dudgeon that after that supreme sacrifice to filial duty, as he considered it, in the matter of adopting the mercantile profession, his father should have endeavoured to exile him to Wellborough. The delights of town were dear to him, the pleasures of the West-end of it formed his solace for his drudgery in the East, and it seemed most unreasonable that he should be expected to give them up. He felt it hard that, just when London was at its gayest, he should have to go to Wellborough even for a few days, which might indeed be weeks. One of his reasons for not taking his wife with him, which would rather have comforted her had she known it, was, that he thought she would somewhat cripple his movements as respected coming back again. The first hour after he could get his business done, he had made up his mind, would be the last he would spend at Wellborough.

As the time of his departure drew nigh—it was to be the day after the picnic at Virginia Water—Ella evinced her love for him in a

thousand ways, as a good wife will do on the eve of ever so short an absence of her consort. But, though he acknowledged them by his manner—for he was neither bear enough, as many men are, to take them as matters of course, nor brute enough, as a few are, to despise them—he did not, to her mind at least, reciprocate her tenderness. She was persuaded, therefore, or persuaded herself, that the moment had not arrived even yet, for throwing herself upon his breast, and confessing to the deception that she had practised on him. He was going away whither such tidings would not meet him, and in the meanwhile, perhaps, some plan might be arranged with Gracie, who had promised to stay with her in his absence, for breaking it to him in a judicious manner. So once more was the evil day put off.

CHAPTER V.

THE PICNIC.

In these days there are many ways of going to Virginia Water. You can go by one of the many coaches, which, in the summer-time, have endeavoured to revive the glories of "the road" with more or less of success. Holiday folks who use this mode of conveyance, and pass, on a fine day, through beautiful scenery to the end of a short journey, forget that the season and the locality have been chosen for them; that they have selected the weather for themselves; that they are not in a hurry, and are bound solely on pleasure; and on the strength of what is, after all, but a mere trip (though even that begins to grow a little tedious at the last), are apt to talk of the "old coaching-days" with regret, and to undervalue the advantages of the rail. But in the times we write of — unless

people were mad enough to drive down in their own carriages—no opportunity was afforded of tiring themselves out, and getting weary of their company, in this way, before they had arrived at the spot selected for their enjoyment. You went by train to Windsor—there was then but one line—and drove the rest of the distance through the beautiful park. In these days, again, it is not uncommon for a gentleman, who is giving a garden-party, to secure "a special" for his London guests; but it is only within the last twenty years that luxury has taken such gigantic strides, and for General Groves' picnic at Virginia Water no such convenience was provided.

His guests travelled by ordinary train, to which, however, a saloon-carriage was attached for their especial behoof, and at the door of it stood Percy Groves, the General's nephew and heir-presumptive, to welcome his uncle's friends and indicate the means of transit provided for them. The General himself would as soon have thought of patronising a picnic, even of his own, as of presiding at a teetotal meeting. When the train was starting he was in his brougham upon his way to the Megatherium Club, where he had occupied the same corner in the whist-room, every afternoon, for the last

quarter of a century. He no longer played, for his memory could not be depended on, but his judgment remained to him, and he backed it on the best performers, with much pleasure to himself and not a little profit. As far as society was concerned with him, he had been extinct for a whole generation; but his wife, Lady Elizabeth, was a leader of fashion, with more acquaintances—and, we had almost added, fewer friends—than any woman in London. She knew everybody, so soon as they had established their claim to be anybody; authors, artists, travellers, millionaires, or beauties. She made a point of getting an introduction to them, of asking them to her receptions in Eaton Square, and of puffing them to other people; she made much of them for periods varying from a fortnight to six months, and then she dropped them, taking no sort of precaution as to breaking their fall. If they ventured to importune her for an explanation of this singular conduct, she put up her large gold eye-glasses—for she affected near-sight—and regarded them with a resuscitation of interest. It seemed so funny that they should not understand that they no longer afforded her any amusement. Even the beggar in the street does not look for a second penny, when you have said: "My

good man, I have nothing more for you," and she had said that to these good people, as plainly as looks could speak. One would really think, to see them behaving in this way, that they had been persons of her own rank in life, who visited her by right, and were not called upon to afford her any excitement!

She had patronised the Landons on account of Ella's exceeding beauty, and was as much surprised as pleased to find her husband so "presentable." She had been informed that he was "an oil and colour man," and had expected him to smell of paint. In her search for "novelties" she sometimes picked up some very queer people; and, indeed, one of her aristocratic acquaintances had likened her garden-parties to a day with the Odd Fellows; but she succeeded—perhaps from this very circumstance—in making them very popular. Aristocracy by itself is an insipid *plat* indeed; but, mingled with a dash of Bohemianism, and, still more, with a suspicion of impropriety, it becomes piquant.

There was nobody that could be called "improper" in the reserved saloon-carriage on the present occasion, but the company was very mixed. The aristocratic element—which included a Cabinet minister who had taken to

spirit-rapping—was well represented; and the "scratch lot," as the Cabinet minister irreverently described his hostess's notabilities, was a remarkable one. There was Mr. Marks, the latest sensational novelist, who had excited the town by his original disposal of all the bad characters of his story; he had shut them up in a snow-bound cavern in Patagonia, where they had been driven to the extremity of devouring one another; and the survivor of them, and principal villain, had only escaped to be similarly dealt with by a native cannibal, afterwards converted by the angelic character of the story, and only prevented from becoming a ritualist clergyman by the consciousness of what he had swallowed.

There was the great prima donna, Madame Livoli, who never opened her pretty mouth except to sing and show her teeth; and the still greater pianist, Herr Stägger, who never opened his mouth at all, but shook his long whity-brown hair and rolled his eyes in a manner pregnant with genius and more eloquent than words. There was Mr. Theodore Plum, the rising historical painter, who dressed as much like Charles II. as he dared, and talked of "his art" till you wished his "art" was dead, and worse.

There was Mr. Rufus Bond, the famous financier, who boasted that he held the South American republics in the hollow of his hand, and who afterwards became more famous still, by having conferred upon him by the representative of his sovereign (in a court of justice) the sentence of five years' penal servitude.

Each of these distinguished personages were received by Lady Elizabeth with well-affected rapture, and took their seats in the saloon where they would, or whither embarrassment hurried them. Cecil and Ella, who were never embarrassed, and the former of whom had at least as good an eye for comfort as Mr. Theodore Plum for colour, selected a comfortable corner, with their backs to the engine, and looked about them.

"By jingo! there's that owl Whymper blinking at us," whispered Cecil.

And, indeed, in the opposite corner sat Mr. Whymper-Hobson, looking very uncomfortable and unknown, and endeavouring to attract their attention.

He was of good family enough by the mother's side, but would certainly not have found himself in that reserved saloon, save for his recent acquisition of wealth. So soon, however, as that circumstance had been made

public, Lady Elizabeth Groves had remembered how tenderly she had once been attached to his mother, when they were girls at school, and wrote to the young man a letter full of graceful sentiments, with an invitation to her picnic in the postscript. She had a niece unmarried, who was likely to become a charge upon her, if she were not otherwise provided for. "I should die happy," she was wont to sigh to confidential friends, "if I could only see dearest Julia suitably settled in life;" but it is probable that she would not have thought seriously of dying, even then. It was a subject that not even the General himself had begun to think of, who was five-and-thirty years her senior.

Mr. Whymper-Hobson had greatly improved in appearance since we knew him at the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich. The time had been unfavourable for making his personal acquaintance, it being that period at which the face of youth is apt to put forth pimples, and straggling tufts which only a mother can admire, or flattery designate as hair. He had now become a good-looking young fellow, with soft whiskers and moustachios to match, and with a certain bashfulness of air which those who did not know him for a sneak might easily mistake for modesty. Cecil of course was not deceived

in this respect, nor was he at all gratified by the signs of recognition made by his former slave. Very few men care to renew acquaintance with their old school-fellows, unless they have happened to be their intimate friends, and not always even then. It takes some courage to say so, for over this subject conventional sentiment has of late years reigned supreme; but as a matter of fact, friendships at school mostly end there, unless, indeed, they are renewed at college, when they often last for life. In the unregenerate days of which we write, at all events, our boyish antecedents were not always so perfectly satisfactory that it was pleasant to be reminded of them. And more especially, I fear, was this the case with those who had been at the Royal Military Academy, which was "neither fish nor flesh"—neither school nor college.

To Cecil's mind, for example, Whymper's appearance recalled some high-handed, not to say tyrannical, behaviour on his own part; and although there was a smile on the other's face, he could not believe in its sincerity. However, there was nothing for him but to make a sign to the young gentleman that he would be welcome to come and sit beside himself and Ella; an invitation that was accepted at once. His greeting of his old acquaintance was so cordial

that, as Cecil afterwards said, "It sickened me to hear the fellow, knowing that he wished me dead;" and, after a few words of commonplace, he turned his back upon him, and, man like, left the *rôle* of entertainer to his wife. What they might say to one another was not likely to have much interest for him; and, besides, the train had started, so that it would have been difficult to attend to their conversation, even had he been so minded.

Mr. Whymper-Hobson's small-talk was not, however, it seemed, without its attraction for Ella. If one had not known that he was almost a stranger to her, the look of her face, when she first caught sight of him, might have aroused suspicions that, at one time, this young man had not been wholly indifferent to her, and her present behaviour would have strengthened them. The simple explanation of it all, of course, was, that he had only recently left Woolwich, and might have heard the story which Gracie had advised her to contradict, but which did not admit of contradiction. As it happened, he at once began to talk of Gracie, whom he knew by sight, and who, he was aware, was Ella's friend.

"She has had a sad loss," said he, "in the death of her mother."

Ella assented with the proper expression of

sympathy; but she was not thinking of the dead, but of the living. What unhappy fate had brought this man to the picnic on the only day that, for some time at least, Cecil would be within hearing of that hateful rumour? Mr. Whymper might not have heard of it, of course; but she fancied that his face said that he had. There was an expression of sly jocosity about it, which in reality was natural to him when talking to ladies—with whom he thought it effective—but which she imagined to proceed from what he knew about her. Even if she were right, it was unlikely he should speak of the matter to Cecil, of whom, as she knew, he stood, or had been wont to stand, in fear; but still there was the chance. She bitterly repented that she had not had the strength of mind to tell all to her husband, even though the time had seemed, of late, inopportune.

"I think it pretty certain that he will marry again," observed Mr. Whymper-Hobson.

"Marry again!" exclaimed Ella, fortunately not aloud, but in a whisper, hoarse with horror.

"Well, it is generally understood that Miss de Horsingham has hooked him."

Then she understood that some intermediate remark of her companion had escaped her observation, and that he was speaking of the Commissary.

Miss de Horsingham was governess in the family of the Commandant at Woolwich; and it was a joke in the garrison that she was the only lady to whom Acting-Deputy-Assistant-Commissary-General Ray ever paid any attention. She was not very young, but she was what is called "a fine woman," and was supposed to have saved a good bit of money.

"You seem quite shocked, Mrs. Landon," said Mr. Whymper-Hobson, with an odious giggle, which was part of his lady-conversational effects.

"I am shocked," said she, "that people should say such things of a man, before his wife is cold in her grave."

"Oh, at Woolwich, you know, people say all sorts of things," returned the young gentleman, so slyly that she felt sure that he was referring to the subject that engrossed her mind.

"It is rather dangerous to disseminate personal scandal," said Ella, "whether at Woolwich or anywhere else."

She had suddenly remembered that, when talking of this man, Cecil had hinted that he was not remarkable for personal courage; and she resolved, if possible, to frighten him.

"Nay, a scandal is a thing that is not true,

Mrs. Landon," replied the young gentleman; "and this talk about the Commissary is a fact. He has speculated for years, it is well known, upon his wife's death; and has had this lady in his eye. Trotter tells me—who is a cousin of the Commandant's — that Ray has always made up to her; her personal beauty not being so much the attraction as the main chance. She openly gave out that she became a governess, not for the salary, which was no object to her, but for the pleasure she derived from 'seeing the minds of her young pupils expand like flowers to the sun;' 'and it is therefore probable,' says Trotter, who is a cynic in a small way, 'that the Commissary will catch a Tartar.'"

"I sincerely hope he will," said Ella; and then turned away to admire Windsor Castle, to which her attention had been drawn by a civil neighbour.

Everybody was in ecstasies about the castle; partly because it indeed stood up most nobly against the delicate spring sky, and partly because it was complimentary to their hostess so to do, to whom they were indebted for the view.

Lady Elizabeth had, doubtless, admired it in her time as much as the rest, only she had seen it about five hundred times before, and her mind was now a little preoccupied; first, with the re-

flection that her niece Julia was little better than a fool to have permitted Mr. Whymper-Hobson to stray from her side, to that of that abominably-pretty young woman — Ella's name her ladyship had forgotten, though she remembered with satisfaction that she was married — and secondly, she was occupied with a calculation of the number of her guests, and how they would find carriage accommodation. In pleasure-parties of this description there are always some who are audacious enough to bring friends, so that it is difficult to make an exact computation. However, at the station, everything was found as it should be, and her ladyship took great care not only to pack Mr. Whymper-Hobson and the niece that was on hand in the same conveyance, but to put Mrs. Cecil Landon somewhere else.

The party were not going to picnic in the Park, you may be sure—it was but the latter end of May; nor in any other month was Lady Elizabeth (who never so much as sat down in a low chair, because of the rheumatism in her knees) likely to propose anything so imprudent as dining in the open air; nor were they bound for the hotel, which satisfies the aspirations of middle-class people. The General was one of those privileged persons who have a house at

Virginia Water within the confines of the Park, and it was thither that the party were bound. Everything would there be found in order for them; and after their entertainment under that hospitable roof, they might picnic, in the sense of wandering about and enjoying themselves, wherever they pleased. The drive, of course, was lovely—the most lovely of its kind to be found in England, or, for that matter, out of it—and under any other circumstances Ella would have enjoyed it thoroughly. She had contrived, in spite of some opposition, to be in the same carriage with her husband; he was in high spirits, and made himself very agreeable to the other occupants of the vehicle, and she was usually never so happy as when she saw that others admired him. But every now and then she caught, through the trees, a view of Mr. Whymper-Hobson in the vehicle ahead, and the sight of him chilled her with vague alarms. The trees that towered along the way, the browsing deer, the rabbits darting through the fern, were spectacles for which she had no leisure. She saw them, indeed, for every incident upon that journey was stamped upon her mind, and recurred to her afterwards a hundred times, with sharp distinctness; but she had no pleasure in them. That May-day in the Forest, with all its glorious sights, and scents, and sounds,

was lost upon her. It seemed as though the very air, laden as it was with the freshness and sweetness of the coming summer, had been poisoned by this stranger's presence.

Arrived at their journey's end, she fled from him into a little coterie with which she had grown to be tolerably intimate, and wherein she felt he would not venture to intrude; but he fascinated her, nevertheless, and her eyes pursued him. It was some comfort to see that Cecil evidently avoided him, for she would rather the man had sought her own companionship than his. At dinner he was seated by Julia Groves, and away from both of them; but, even then, she fancied that she formed the subject of his conversation. Miss Julia had looked up once with elevated eyebrows in her direction, and then had coloured, and looked down, confused. Doubtless that hateful wretch had been telling his neighbour what he thought would please her best—a scandal about a friend. If she could only have got Cecil quietly away immediately after dinner, upon pretence of sudden indisposition, she would have done it; but that would have made a fuss, and drawn the general attention to herself, from which she now shrank as timorously as though she had exchanged natures with Gracie Ray. She saw her husband leave

the house with some gentlemen, of whom Whymper was one, to have a stroll by the lake-side with their cigars; and at the same time Lady Elizabeth proposed a visit to the famous temple which George the Magnificent set up, and of course she had to acquiesce. The thrush was loud in the woods that afternoon, but it had no melody for her; she was listening for a voice that had wont to be more sweet to her than any bird's, but which she feared to find discordant. Never had that modern ruin, with its carpet of tender green, pranked with the flowers of spring, looked more exquisitely beautiful; but her eyes were fixed upon the quarter from which her husband must needs return, and beheld neither grass nor flower. Around her broke the light jest, followed by tinkling laughter, as the sparkling wave breaks on the summer beach, but her ears were deaf to it; they were on the watch for some sound—she knew not what—but with which she felt very sure no mirth would mingle.

Presently, Percy Groves—the General's aide-de-camp, as he was called—who had been one of the lake-side party, was seen strolling slowly back alone. He took his seat on the ground beside her, and began chatting in his thin, good-humoured way. Then, dropping his voice to a grave whisper, "Will you take my arm," he said, "and come as

far as the inn, your husband is waiting for you."

She obeyed at once, though her limbs trembled as she rose, and she clung to him in a manner that some aides-de-camp would have misconstrued.

"What is the matter?" faltered she, "for I am sure that something has happened."

"Well, yes; I hope it is nothing serious. They have got him out, and he was coming-to all right——"

"Good heavens! Has Cecil fallen in the lake?"

"No, no, it was Whymper-Hobson. He took a little more champagne than was good for him, and somehow or other picked a quarrel with your husband."

"With my husband!" Her heart sank almost as low as when she had thought Cecil had been half drowned.

"Yes, it was foolish of him, for Landon is almost the last man to choose for such an experiment; and the place was badly chosen too—the only deep one in all the lake."

"What, did Cecil push him in?"

"No, indeed he didn't; there was no pushing about it; he took him round the waist and flung him in as though he had been a water-spaniel,

which, unhappily for Whymper-Hobson, he was not. It was touch-and-go with him for a minute or two, though, as I said, he is all right now; only, of course, it is an unpleasant business, and Landon thinks it better to get away and avoid a row."

"You are not deceiving me, Mr. Groves?" gasped Ella; "the man is not drowned?"

"Not a bit of it; he is rather wet, of course, but that's all, and by this time they have put him to bed. A carriage will be ready at the inn for you and your husband. I am so awfully sorry you have to leave us. Shall I run back and fetch your shawl?"

For Ella was shivering as though she had fallen into the lake herself.

"No, no; I am quite warm, thank you."

They had reached the inn garden, crowded with early pleasure-seekers, who had already heard of the "accident," and who gazed with curiosity at her pale and frightened face, for she wore no veil.

"Where is my husband?" murmured poor Ella.

"Outside the inn, no doubt; he didn't want to be in the way when Hobson was brought in, I daresay."

In the road was a closed carriage with Cecil

standing by it. He did not even look at Ella as he opened the door for her to enter, but turned his pale, stony face to her companion.

"I am much obliged to you, Groves," said he. Then, in a lower voice: "If that fellow wishes anything more, you will tell him where to find me."

"Oh, stuff; he took too much wine—and, begad, too much water afterwards—that's all; it will all come to nothing, my dear fellow."

"Drive on," cried Cecil, in a harsh, impatient voice; and off whirled the carriage with the unhappy pair.

If her husband had begun to storm and swear, if he had even threatened to leave her by reason of her perfidy and falsehood, Ella could have borne it better than the silence and contempt in which he wrapped himself. Not a word dropped from his lips, and he kept his eyes averted from her, fixed on the glancing trees and vanishing hedgerows.

"Oh, Cecil, won't you speak to me?" said she, presently.

"Not now," returned he, curtly.

"Then may I speak to you?"

"Not now," returned he again, in such a tone that she felt it was hopeless to address him.

The last time they had travelled together in

a similar conveyance, alone, had been during their honeymoon, only a few months back, yet how long ago it seemed, and, alas! by what a distance were they now parted. Would that icy voice ever speak to her in loving accents again, or that stony face beam with its old smile? It was very cruel of him to act as he was doing; and though she allowed that she had done wrong, she did not think that she deserved this. Even at the railway station, though they had to stop there half an hour for a train, he did not speak to her; but, having placed her in the waiting-room, walked up and down the platform alone, smoking a cigar. In the train he selected a carriage with several people in it, notwithstanding there were others empty, and, though he sat beside her, he never opened his lips. He was dumb, too, in the cab on their way home. Not till they got within doors, and were alone together in the drawing-room, did he break silence with, "And now, madam, perhaps you will tell me why you married me under a false name?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE CONFESSION.

THE question that her husband had put to Ella was one she had been expecting for many a day, for she had never in her heart believed that it would not be put. She had rehearsed, a hundred times, the very scene that was about to commence between them. She had chalked out a line of apology for herself; she had anticipated certain homethrusts, and made up her mind how to parry them; and, in a word, you would have said—like the counsel of other unfortunate persons who are not in the presence of their judge, but "under remand"—that she was fully prepared with an answer to the charge that had been brought against her. But now that the judge was there, looking so stern and so unyielding, and even with an expression of foregone condemnation on his face, words for the moment failed her.

"Come," said he, bitterly, "you have had three hours to make up a tale in; I should have thought less would have sufficed for your quick wits."

The taunt was welcome to her; it acted like a spur on a high-couraged horse, and made her take the fence.

"I shall tell you no tale, Cecil, if you mean by that a lie, but the simple truth. I have acted ill to you, and worse to others; but I am not so much to blame as you may think. If you fear, for example, that any disgrace attaches to you, through me, from anything I have done before I married you——"

"It is possible," put in Cecil, with a harsh laugh; "husbands generally do fear it when they find their wives have had to falsify their marriage register."

"Then you do me wrong, Cecil," she answered calmly. "My maiden name——"

Again he laughed; she coloured to her forehead, and flashed one fiery glance from her dark eyes; but her tone was quiet as before, as she went on:

"My name, before I married you, was not Mayne, but Juxon."

He started a little; the blow had come from an unexpected quarter. She had herself done

nothing shameful; but the Colonel had been her father, not her uncle; and she had not been born in wedlock. That was her history, as he now read it, and as she knew he read it.

"My father was, and is, a clergyman in Yorkshire," she went on. "My uncle Gerard is his brother. We three are the only survivors of our name and race. Our family is an unfortunate one. We are cursed with an hereditary disease—that of an evil temper. You have observed it, Cecil, for yourself, I fear."

He gave his shoulders a slight shrug. The circumstances were much too serious to make "temper" a matter of importance.

"Let us come to the point, madam."

"That is the point, Cecil. It is temper, and nothing else, that has placed me in this false position."

"And me?" put in the other disdainfully.

"Yes, and you through me. Many people have bad tempers, but we Juxons are possessed with devils. I believe I was the worst of all of them, Cecil, till I knew you; but you and love together, I hope, have cast my devil out."

He smiled again, this time contemptuously, yet not so much as if he doubted whether she was cured in that way as that it was of no consequence whether she was cured or not. Why

did she thus beat about the bush, when it could profit her nothing; instead of answering him his question straight, What made her deny her name?

"If my mother had lived, things might have been better with me; but I was left as a child, alone, to the care of my father. He was a good man, while I was far from good; but, like the rest of us, he was of a violent and imperious disposition, and, unhappily, we had not an idea in common. From the time that I first began to think, I was all for independence and equality; for a wild sort of justice and rude right. I disliked control of all sorts, but tyranny was loathsome to me. Any slight put upon myself threw me into paroxysms of passion; and even an injustice committed upon another would do the like. My father was not unjust, but he was high-handed, and had an extreme reverence for all authority, which of course included his own. We came of a loyal stock. That Bishop Juxon, to whom King Charles gave his garter upon the scaffold, was an ancestor of ours whose memory my father almost worshipped. That garter, as may be read in history, remained with us for many generations, till some female member of our race, transported with passion, and wishing to spite her husband, threw it into the fire before

his face. It was rescued half burnt, and even thus was considered by my father, notwithstanding that he loved wealth for its own sake, a more precious heirloom than the costliest service of plate could be, or the rarest diamonds. It used to lie in a casket upon his study-table, among the ancient books and manuscripts he loved so well—for he was an antiquary—and he held it in higher estimation than all his relics together. Bear with me, Cecil, while I tell my tale;" for he was looking the picture of impatience, and tapping with his foot, a sound with which of late months she had grown familiar.

"Being what we were, it was only natural —though far from right—that my father and I should disagree. Of course it was I who ought to have submitted to his elder judgment, but he could not convince me, and I could never feign to be convinced. Yes, Cecil, whatever I have been, I have been always honest, and was so after a fashion—though a wrong one—even at the very time when I deceived you. Such honesty, you will say, and have a right to say, was cheap, since it consisted only in doing my own will and pleasure; yet I must plead that it was not quite so, but that my curse of temper made me as frank, as apt to cleave to what my rage had spoken. As I grew up, my father and

myself, though dwelling beneath the same roof always, grew more and more asunder; a state of things which, Heaven forgive him for it, uncle Gerard fomented. He had quarrelled with his brother, while I was still a child, upon some money question. We were all rich, and though, as I have said, my father loved wealth for its own sake, he was not one to grasp at it, as Gerard was. There was a sum that by the law fell to my father, but the man who left it died without a will, and it was known that he had wished the brothers to share his property. My father would have given the half of it, as in duty bound, to Gerard, had it been asked of him; but Gerard claimed it as a right.

"This my father refused to admit, and, after a terrible scene, they parted, never to meet again.

"I took my uncle's part, thinking him wronged, and that was wormwood to his adversary. From child to woman I grew more wilful and more headstrong daily; while my father remained as masterful as ever, but with less of power. He knew that I should be independent of him in a little while, and that too galled him. He had many excuses, as I now can see—too late—and I had few. For one error, however, and that the most important, he was alone to blame.

He used all his influence and authority to make me marry a man for whom I had no love. There lived near us one Sir Percy Pomfret, whose large estate joined our own, and who was wont to pester me with his attentions. He was a baronet of ancient race, which was nearly all that could be said in his favour, save that he was rich; but in my father's eyes this was very much. An alliance between the Juxons and the Pomfrets seemed to him to be the most fitting conceivable; a marriage that might indeed be said to have been made in heaven. I cared for neither Sir Percy nor his ancestors, and on a certain day, only a little while before I came of age, being much provoked by my father's importunities, I told him so. Words grew high between us, though I scarce know what I said; but he told me I was a disgrace to him and to the race of Juxon. Then, urged by the devil in my blood, I snatched the royal martyr's gift from the casket in which it lay, and, as my ancestress had done before me, I threw it in the fire, which consumed it. It was terrible to see my father's face; but in my passion nothing had terrors for me. He rose and cursed me—me, his daughter—protesting that he would own me as his child no more. 'Nor will I own *you!*' cried I, 'as father—I swear it! From henceforth I will bear another

name.' 'It will be better so,' he said. And then I flung myself out of the room.

"Those were the last words I heard him speak, or shall ever hear from his lips. That very night I left his roof and sought that of his brother. My uncle received me gladly. He had a genuine regard for me, I do believe, and my income was an advantage to him, since he was not very wealthy; but most of all it pleased him that I had quarrelled with my father. I called myself Ella Mayne, pretending to be his niece upon the mother's side. He approved of that, because of the humiliation that it would cause my father, who, whatever he had said in haste and passion, would never wish me to deny my name."

"Then Colonel Juxon was a party to the fraud on me?" observed Cecil, coldly.

"If fraud it can be called, he was. Indeed I would have told you all before I married you, but that he dissuaded me from it. He said that you would insist, he thought, on my wedding you under my proper name, or else you would break off the engagement."

"He was right," said Cecil; "I wish to Heaven he had told me."

"Oh, Cecil," pleaded Ella, "would you have made me break my oath?"

"I do not say that, madam."

It was plain he meant the other alternative; that he would not have married her. How hard, and cold, and cruel was he become!

"But, Cecil, I did love you so dearly, almost as much as I love you now." She stole a little towards him, but he drew back.

"Not so much, it seems, madam, but that you preferred before me the gratification of your own pride and passion. The oath you kept was like the oath of Herod, and I was sacrificed to it. What had I to do with your father's temper or your own, or with the race of Juxon, that I should be made the scapegoat of them all? Under pretence of love you have disgraced me. Yes, disgraced; I was told as much to-day by Whymper, and half-drowned the man, simply, as it now seems, for telling the truth."

"Oh, Cecil, have you no pity?"

"Yes, I pity myself. Bad as is this story of yours, even told by your own lips, do you suppose anybody will believe it? Will not the finger of scorn be pointed at me, as the man whose wife married him under a false name, for reasons——"

"Reasons, Cecil? I have told you the reasons."

"And I don't say they may not be correct;

but others may not be quite so credulous. Remember, however, you have falsified your marriage register; which is, in the eye of the law, I believe, a very grave offence. It is bad for a man to have married a felon."

"You use very harsh words, Cecil."

"I call things by their right names, madam; which I daresay seems strange to you."

"'Madam' sounds very strange to me, Cecil."

Her tone would have touched any heart that was not of stone, and Cecil's, for all its faults, was "very human."

"You have brought it on yourself, Ella," returned he, with a peevishness that was, by contrast with his former accents, almost kind; "your conduct has been, to say the least of it, most selfish and inconsiderate. Yet there have been times when you have thought me selfish, and, indeed, have hinted as much."

"If I did, I retract it, Cecil. You have behaved to me as well as I have deserved; though, perhaps, not so well as I seemed to deserve."

The colour rushed with violence into Cecil's face.

"I don't wish to be hard upon you," he said, "I have had my faults, no doubt; and I am sorry for them."

"If I have anything to forgive you, husband, I forgive it freely. Will you say as much to me?"

"Well, I am not a fellow to bear malice, you know; but you have put me in a very unpleasant position, Ella. I really don't know what I ought to do. Whether we ought not to be married again, for one thing. Yet what would people say then?"

"Surely that will be unnecessary, dear Cecil." She did not like to tell him that her uncle had taken precautions beforehand to ascertain that her marriage was legal. That would seem now to have been like a conspiracy against him.

"Well, I will think over all that, while I am away," said he.

"Then you must go to-morrow, dear Cecil, must you?"

It seemed so hard to her that he was going to leave her now, before she could make up to him, as it were, for the wrong she had done him; a week hence, when she had won him over to forgive her, she could have borne to part with him; but now he would leave her with this wound to his self-love only half healed, with his mind still filled with bitter thoughts of her.

"Of course I must go, Ella—I have promised my father to do so; and though I am not that model of filial obedience that you, of all people, would have me to be——"

"Yes, Cecil, that is true," she put in, quickly. "But you should not reproach me with it. The misery that I had brought upon myself—for I was miserable whenever I thought of it—by my quarrel with my father, made me all the more solicitous to keep you on good terms with yours. I would have done everything, short of giving you up, to reconcile you to him; and in having accomplished that, I feel I have done something to mitigate my grievous fault. What wretchedness would have been yours if that kind old man, who loves you better than aught else in the world—though at times he may cross your will—had said to you, 'You shall never more be son of mine.' My father once loved me as dearly, Cecil."

"And yet, being a Juxon, you never intend to set eyes upon him again."

"I should not dare to speak to him, Cecil, unless he spoke to me; but I have seen him." Here she dropped her voice. "It was he whom we met at Furness Abbey."

"Oh, that was he, was it? I remember how you were put out; you said it was the Furness

air that had affected you. A fib or two, however, more or less, is no great matter to you."

"Cecil, you are hard upon me. I have not been hard upon you, when you have said things that were not quite true for your own purposes. Nay, I do not reproach you; your conscience tells you, or should tell you, what I mean. I have confessed my fault—my crime, if you will have it so."

"Not altogether voluntarily, however," answered Cecil, dryly.

"That is true; but take the pain of the rack into consideration, and even an extorted confession should count for something for the poor wretch who makes it. Husband, I have been on the rack for months, tortured with the fear of the exposure that has come at last —to-day. In judging me, or rather in meting out my sentence, remember what I have suffered. You say you are not one to bear malice, and I do believe it."

"Well, of course I'm not. When the eggs are broken, and the milk is spilt, there's nothing to be done, that I can see, but to wipe it up, and look, or try to look, as if nothing had happened."

It was not a romantic way of expressing

pardon, but Ella was grateful enough to have obtained it in any form. She put her hands upon his shoulders, and lifted up her face to his. "Kiss me, darling, and say I am forgiven."

"Well, there then;" and he kissed her.

It was not the sort of kiss to which Ella had been accustomed from him, but he did it. Her story had been told, and her apology had, after a fashion, been accepted. Anyone who has looked forward for months to an "operation," knows what a relief it is to have got it over, no matter how; to find one is alive after it; and, above all, that it has not to be gone through again. It had not been a very successful one in Ella's case, but she had reason to be thankful for small mercies. "There will be no secret between my darling and me henceforth," thought she that night, and thanked Heaven for it.

In this, poor soul, she was doomed to be most grievously mistaken; but it is said, and I believe is truly said, that Heaven is never thanked in vain.

CHAPTER VII.

OLD FRIENDS.

A GREAT poet has told us that there are few things more delightful to a young matron, than to "bring her babe and make her boast" at her father's house; and second only to it, perhaps, is the pleasure she feels at entertaining, under her own roof, the girl, still unmarried, who has been her chosen friend in the old days. She has probably confided to her long ago—or what seems to her long ago—her affection for the man who has become her husband; they have speculated together upon that future which has now become her happy present; and it delights her to talk over these matters again, now that doubt is over, and her good fortune assured. If the visitor has a little love affair of her own on hand, so much the better; nothing pleases the young wife so much as to play the mentor, and dispense

advice and comfort, from her new pedestal, to her who has not yet been lifted up above the throng of maidens to the high estate of matrimony.

Nor was Ella different from other young matrons in this respect, though perhaps somewhat less absolute and arbitrary. Under ordinary circumstances it would have enchanted her to receive Gracie—towards whom her feelings were at least as sisterly and sympathetic as ever—as her guest. But it was a disappointment and almost a humiliation to her, that Cecil should be from home when her friend arrived. Moreover, although she had parted from him on good terms—that is to say, without absolute coldness—she was bitterly aware that the warmth had been almost wholly on her side. He had forgiven her her deception, for it was his nature to forgive; but she saw that he had not been able to forget it; that if it did not actually rankle in his bosom, it was there, disturbing, if not affecting still more seriously, his devotion to her. She had not that confidence in his affections which she had hitherto persuaded herself to feel, notwithstanding that she had been occasionally jealous of him. She had been impatient of his frequent absences, irritated at the flirtations of which she had been occasionally witness—for Cecil had certainly a demonstrative way of making himself

agreeable to women—but in her heart of hearts she had believed in his fidelity, and in the love for his wife that secured it. But now she did not feel so sure of him; she felt that that warm, but too impressible heart was not so safely anchored at home as it had been. It was a relief to her that, since he must go, he was going away from town and its temptations. There was not likely to be any society in Wellborough of which he could become the darling, and be petted by young ladies, as had seemed the case, to her eyes at least, in London.

She loved her husband passionately, devotedly, and yet she felt she could not talk about him to a shrewd girl like Gracie, in a passionate, devoted way. It was difficult even satisfactorily to account for his absence. Most husbands—especially when they had been married so short a time—would, she knew it would strike Gracie, have taken their wives with them, upon an expedition the duration of which was so undefined.

Nevertheless, she was sincerely glad to see her old friend, who arrived within an hour or so after Cecil's departure for the West; and whose presence, if it did not, as he had once so cruelly hinted, make up for his absence, at least prevented her mind from dwelling upon it.

Gracie was in deep mourning, of course, but looking well, and by no means lugubrious. She was not one to put on a mask of woe in deference to custom. She felt her mother's loss as keenly as any daughter could, but she did not pretend to regret it. On the contrary, she had welcomed, though not on her own account, the end which the poor invalid had herself so long desired. Helpless, hopeless, and a burthen—the helping to bear which, though only with his little finger, she had well known was grudged by her liege lord—what attraction had life left for her? Her end, of course, formed the first topic of discourse between Ella and Gracie, but it was not pursued for long. The circumstances were too painful, and too well known to both of them, to be dwelt upon.

"You must have had a terrible time, dear Gracie."

"It was very sad, dear, but not terrible. Dear mamma suffered no pain, and it was a great comfort to be able to be with her always."

"I suppose no one saw her of late months beside the doctor, save you and your father?"

"Papa was a good deal away; he could be of no use at home, you see; and people took compassion upon him—your uncle Gerard especially—and asked him out pretty often."

This defence of the Commissary was rather unexpected, for Gracie had been wont to be a partisan upon the right side, and Ella at once came to the just conclusion that this charity towards him had been his wife's work. In her latter days she had besought her daughter to think of her father's conduct with charity. "I have never been the wife to him, my dear, that a husband has the right to expect, though I think I did my best. The fault is not all on his side, believe me." And then again she would say: "Gracie darling, never marry unless you are quite sure that you will love your husband. Work your fingers to the bone, rather, in getting your own living."

She seemed to take it for granted that her daughter would not long rely upon the Commissary for support. Gracie had some little accomplishments of her own, which, as a governess, she had confidence would at least earn her bread and shelter; and about these slender talents, and how to employ them, it was her design to consult Ella, but she did not speak of them just now.

"You have not seen much of Uncle Gerard, I suppose, Gracie?"

"Not much, but more of late than usual.

He has been very kind — kinder than I am afraid I gave him credit for being, Ella. I think he came, of late, quite as much to see me as papa."

"I am glad to hear it," returned Ella, a little stiffly; she had not forgiven the Colonel for persuading her to keep her change of name a secret from her husband, notwithstanding Cecil had told her that he would not have married her, under such circumstances, had he been aware of them. She was very clever, but she had certainly not a logical mind.

"Did he—did my uncle—ever talk to you, Gracie, about that—that report you wrote to me about—the scandal, as you called it, respecting myself?"

"Never!"

"Well, it was no scandal, dear," said Ella, looking down upon the floor; "it was, I regret to say, the truth."

"The truth! that you and Mr. Landon were never properly married!"

"What!" cried Ella, in a flame, "did they dare say that? Then they told an infamous and cruel falsehood."

"Of course they did, my darling; such a falsehood as I should not have ventured to

repeat to you, and which I only so much as hinted at in my letter, in order that it might be contradicted by the proper person."

"I see, Gracie dear, I see; don't suppose for a moment that I am angry with you. But the disgrace of it, the shame of it! That our name should have become a by-word! How good of you, it was, Gracie, to come and see a woman of whom such tales were told."

"My dear Ella, how you talk! Do you suppose I believed such a story? I only heard it once——"

"Who told you?" broke in Ella, passionately.

"My darling, that is not fair. It was an idle, gossiping woman, and I answered her as you would have had me answer her, you may be sure. I said that you were the frankest girl I had ever known, and quite incapable of any deception. I said that I would lay my life upon it, that Ella Mayne was Ella Mayne, and no one else. I said—— My darling, what is the matter?"

Ella had covered her face with her hands, and burst into a passion of tears.

"It was true, Gracie, it was true," sobbed she; "not about the marriage, of course—the marriage was good enough; but I did pass under a false name."

It was curious enough that, anxious and

apprehensive as she had been when she made her confession to her husband, Ella had not felt so ashamed as she did now in the presence of her friend. After all, it had been in a manner for Cecil's sake, in order to make sure of him as her own, that she deceived him; but in Gracie's case there was no such mitigating circumstances. She had been false to her without excuse, though indeed it had been necessary, if she must needs deceive at all; and then this girl was herself so true and simple.

"You did pass under a false name?" echoed Gracie, like one who can scarce believe her ears.

"Yes, I did. It was forced upon me. You should know all before you presume to judge." Gracie's tone, and a certain look of pain and disapprobation she unconsciously wore, had offended her. "Listen to me, while I tell you all, and then tell me what you would have done in my case."

And then Ella told her the whole story, just as she had told her husband.

"It is all very sad and deplorable, my darling," said Gracie, tenderly, when her friend had finished; "and I pity you from the very bottom of my heart."

"I am sure you do," returned Ella, who wanted an ally, however, rather than a sympa-

thiser, and was by no means satisfied with this commiseration; "never was such a victim of circumstances, you must admit, as poor me."

"It was a difficult position, indeed," said Gracie.

"Yes; there was nothing else to be done, was there?"

Gracie was silent.

"Nay," said Ella, boldly, "if you would have acted differently, pray say so. What would you have done? Come, would you have told Cecil?"

"I should certainly have told Mr. Landon before I married him."

"But that, my uncle told me, would have invalidated the marriage; and, at all events, I feared that Cecil would never have consented to let me marry under a false name."

"I should have run that risk, Ella. You insist upon my giving my opinion, else I would much rather not; but merely answering the question as you put it, I say I should have thought it my duty to tell the truth."

"Perhaps you would have also thought it your duty to break your oath," said Ella, scornfully.

"Most certainly I should," was the unexpected reply. "It was an oath, like Herod's,

that ought never to have been made, and still less kept."

"It is very easy to talk of Herod," said Ella, remembering that her husband had instanced the same historical personage in support of his own view of the matter, "but the cases are in no way identical. I cut nobody's head off, nor indeed did anyone any injury but myself, by bearing a feigned name."

"Does not your husband think himself injured?"

"Certainly not. He was annoyed, of course; but my explanation satisfied him better than it seems to satisfy you, Gracie."

"I am truly pleased to hear it, dear Ella; whether I am satisfied, as you call it, or not, is a very small matter, if *he* is so. I should not have taken upon myself to offer an opinion upon the subject had you not compelled me to do so. If you really kept your feigned name—though I think you were mistaken in so doing—because you had sworn to do so, and for no other reason——"

"Why, what other reason could there be?" interrupted Ella, impatiently.

"I don't know; but if there was none, you were not so very wrong, perhaps, after all. It seems to me that your uncle Gerard was more to blame than yourself."

"Well, yes; he knew that my discarding my proper name would pain my father; and that was so far agreeable to him, their quarrel being so very bitter. You look like Rhadamanthus and Minos rolled into one, Gracie," continued Ella, forcing a laugh. "If I had had an idea that you would be so severe upon me, I don't think I should have had the courage to plead guilty; and it is no use, it seems," added she, bitterly, "to throw myself upon the mercy of the court."

"My dear Ella, I am passing no judgment upon you, believe me. I am only very, very sorry. You have a father, who, with all his faults——"

"I had a father, Gracie, once; I have none now."

"You may try to persuade yourself so, Ella; but you are not such adamant as you would have me believe. I have no doubt your treatment at home was very injudicious, harsh, and even bad. But time is a healer of all injuries, and nature is not to be denied. There will come a day when your father will open his loving arms to you once again, and you will run to them to nestle at his heart."

"Never, never!" cried Ella, not defiantly, however, only incredulously. "You do not know my father. Don't let us talk about it, please."

There were other subjects that these young women for various reasons made "taboo" between them. When Ella observed, rather by way of "saying something" to break the silence that followed her last words, than from any interest she felt in the subject, "I must say it was very good of your papa to spare you to me, Gracie," her friend had replied, "Yes; he will, however, be doubtless a good deal at the Commandant's," so very dryly, that it was plain that Gracie's father also must be excluded as a topic of conversation. Ella remembered what Mr. Whymper-Hobson had told her about the Commissary and the governess, and understood at once that, however charitable Gracie might be to her father for her mother's sake upon all other points, she could not forgive him his transgressions against her mother. Again, there was another subject upon which Ella ventured, and found it very delicate ground.

"Have you seen anything of our friend Mr. Darall, lately?"

At the sound of that name poor Gracie's face flushed up, and the hands, which, as usual, were diligently engaged about some useful piece of work, began to tremble over their task.

"Yes; he came over from Chatham, where he is quartered, you know, so soon as he saw the notice of dear mamma's death in the paper; and

he—he—left his card upon us the day after the funeral."

"But did you not see him, Gracie?"

"Yes, I saw him; just for a little while."

"We were so glad, Gracie, to find he had got the Engineers; for though, if ever anyone deserved them, he did, yet prizes don't always go by merit. It is the only corps, Cecil says, in which a poor man has 'chances,' appointments, and things which enable him to marry and live in England. But doubtless," added Ella, slyly, "Mr. Darall told you all that himself?"

"Yes; he told me; but it is of no use, Ella, and it is very painful to me to talk about it."

And Gracie's eyes began to soften and melt. Then, of course, Ella kissed her, and they were very happy, in girl fashion, mingling their tears together. Ella understood that though, for the present, she must not flatter her friend's hopes by hinting at an engagement, the hopes existed, and that nothing would please her better than talking of Mr. Darall, so long as it was not in direct relation to herself.

"Cecil's regard for him is so great that I am quite jealous of it," said she, it must be confessed, with a little sacrifice of truth; she would have been well pleased if no one had ever given her more cause for jealousy than Mr. Darall.

"Though circumstances have separated them of late, my husband has the same friendship for him as ever."

"And so has"—she was within an ace of saying Hugh—"so has Mr. Darall for your husband. But indeed his leaving the Academy was felt to be quite a public misfortune. He was far the most popular cadet, Mr. Darall says, in all the Company. So brilliant, and so light-hearted."

"He can certainly make himself very agreeable," said Ella, with that mock-modesty which a loving wife always puts on when her husband is praised.

"Can! Yes, and does!" returned Gracie, with genuine enthusiasm. She knew little of Cecil herself, but saw him through her lover's eyes. "Everybody says you are such a lucky girl."

"I don't complain of the lot I have drawn from the marriage-bag," said Ella, to whom Gracie's words afforded a genuine comfort. "I have surely no real reason to complain," was what she was saying to herself.

"No, indeed; nor has he anything to complain of in his wife, I am very sure. How grateful he ought to be to you for having reconciled him with his father. Do you remember that dreadful visit of ours, Ella, to Wethermill Street?"

And then the two girls began to laugh together, and Ella protested that she would ask the old gentleman to dinner, that he should renew his acquaintance with her friend. "If you play your cards well with him, Gracie, I am not at all sure that you may not become my stepmother."

Altogether the meeting between the two "old friends," as these young people called themselves, was very satisfactory, and Ella felt that, now she had made her confession to her, and had been absolved, Gracie's company would be a great comfort.

CHAPTER VIII.

ELLA DOES NOT ENJOY HER NEWSPAPER.

If there were no men in the world, it is my belief that women would keep house very differently. They think more of being warm and well-dressed themselves than of their dinners being so, and, indeed, care little or nothing for eating and drinking. Many of them—though this is not so universal a fault as some wicked men aver—are downright stingy, and have a natural yearning for saving and cheeseparing; and when a female friend comes to visit them, will preface their system of economy by the treacherous observation, "Well, my dear, I know nothing will please you better than my making no stranger of you;" and thereupon they put her on short rations. Ella had none of these notions of retrenchment about her—which are horrible when not dictated by necessity—but yet she fell at once

into a different way of living, now that Gracie and she were alone, from that she had practised with her husband. Their meals were less protracted, but on the other hand were very seldom punctual; they drank little or no wine, but were very extravagant in candlelight, for they would sit up, talking, in one another's rooms till all was blue—or nearly so—that is, till the small hours of the morning. Ella would have taken her to the theatre every night had circumstances admitted of it, but of course Gracie had no desire for amusement at present; so they talked together all the more. It is but fair to add that they did something else. For three hours every day Gracie pursued her studies, with the object of fitting herself for that educational calling she had in view; and as for Ella, she was an omnivorous reader.

"There is one great advantage, Gracie, in my husband's absence," said she, gaily, as they sat down to their first morning's meal together, "that we shall have the newspaper to ourselves at breakfast; otherwise I never get a sight of it till he is off to the City. I daresay the Commissary hides himself behind the broad sheet of *The Times* just in the same way, so that you never get a word out of him."

"Papa doesn't take in any newspaper," said

Gracie; "he finds them all in the mess-anteroom, you know."

"I shouldn't like that at all. I should feel lost without my newspaper. You must read all the tid-bits out to me while I make your tea, if you please."

"But what do you call the tid-bits?" inquired Gracie, taking up the paper in obedience to her friend's directions.

"Well, I think I like the accidents and offences best," returned Ella, gravely; "especially the offences; not the police reports exactly, though they are very interesting in their way; I am not a bit ashamed of saying I like the police reports."

"Oh, Ella!"

"My dear, it's all nonsense; a person of intelligence, as I flatter myself I am, may read of anything that happens. I can imagine harm being done to the mind by bad fiction, but to shut one's eyes to facts that go on under one's nose is, in my opinion, weakness."

"But are not some of the facts quite horrible, Ella?"

"Of course they are; and those are the most delightful. Nobody wants a ship to be wrecked, of course; but if it *is* wrecked everybody goes down to the seaside to see it. Similarly I disap-

prove as much as you do, I hope, of murders; but when they have occurred, why should I not get my little enjoyment out of them? I absolutely dote on murders. Come, I believe you have found one now, and are gloating over it all to yourself, you selfish thing."

"No, indeed, I have not," said Gracie, hurriedly, and, unseen by Ella, changing the direction of her eyes to another part of the sheet.

"Well, what are you reading? What is it that seems to interest you so?"

"'The Queen and the princesses walked out this morning on the slopes,'" read Gracie, aloud.

"Well, that's not my notion of a tid-bit, Gracie," laughed Ella; "but pray go on. What dress did the Princess Mary wear at the Groveses' ball last night? I beg to say I was asked to that myself, but the claims of friendship intervened."

"Oh, I am so sorry, Ella; I should have been quite content to be left alone."

"My dear, I didn't 'care twopence,' as my father-in-law says, about the ball, especially as dear Cecil could not have accompanied me."

"Have you heard from your husband this morning?"

"No, nor did I expect to do so. He is rather naughty about writing at all times, and it was

only just possible, if it were even that, that he could have written from Wellborough by the evening post; he did not arrive there until quite late. It is a long way off, you know."

"Yes, and the line is not direct. He had to change at Pullham, had he not, and then at Middleton, to get on to the branch-line?"

"Why, you are Bradshaw personified, Gracie."

"No, you told me about Middleton yourself, and as to Pullham, that is in the paper. Now don't be frightened, darling, because there is nothing the matter; your husband is quite safe; but there has been an accident at Pullham."

"An accident!" Ella's face had become a picture of horror; it was certain that all kinds of facts were by no means welcome to her.

"How do you know my husband is safe," cried she; "that he is not killed?"

"Because nobody is killed, Ella; and the names of all the injured are mentioned. There is nothing very shocking in the account; you can read it for yourself, darling."

"No, no, not I," answered Ella, with a shudder. "You are quite sure all the names are mentioned; there is nobody 'unknown' to whom the most dreadful thing of all always happens."

"No, there is nothing of the kind. All the passengers, with the exception of those named in

the list, it says, were sent on to Middleton by the next train."

"Thank Heaven," said Ella, fervently. "Now tell me all about it. Not in the newspaper words —it always exaggerates things so horribly—but in your own."

"Well, it seems the forty minutes past eleven train from London——"

"The very train he went by," murmured Ella; "yes, go on."

"Well, that arrived at Pullham in good time, and proceeded on its way; but the train for Middleton was kept waiting there for a certain up-train. It had to cross the main line, it seems——"

"How horrible," cried Ella, wringing her hands; "it was cut in two."

"No, it wasn't that. After waiting a long while, the station-master telegraphed to the next station to stop the up-train, while he sent the branch-train down the line to the point of junction, which was some little distance off."

"Ah! I see," cried Ella, like one who is suffering an intense physical pain, "and the message never arrived; so the trains met."

"No, darling, that wasn't it. The up-train was stopped till the branch-train started, after which the former was released by another tele-

gram, and came on. There was plenty of time for the smaller train to have got across out of harm's way, but the pointsman at the junction made a fatal mistake, and turned it on to the main up-line; and, before it could be stopped, the up-train ran into it."

"How very, very dreadful!" shuddered Ella.

"Yet it was not quite so bad as you would think, for the line was fortunately a straight one, and the engineman of the up-train saw what was about to happen, and slackened speed. However, there were a great many casualties—broken bones and contused faces—but nothing worse; and all the passengers that are not in this long list escaped, it says, 'unhurt.'"

"But why did not Cecil telegraph to me that he was unhurt?"

"Well, my darling, that may not have occurred to him. When we are all safe ourselves it does not strike us that others may have their fears for us. You will, doubtless, hear by this evening's post."

"I shall telegraph immediately to Wellborough, to make sure," said Ella.

This was done at once, before breakfast was proceeded with; for which, indeed, the poor hostess had quite lost her appetite. She had

gained courage, however, by this time, to peruse the account of the catastrophe herself.

"What a brave fellow that must have been, Gracie, who jumped with his young wife out of the train!"

"Yes; it must take a good deal of courage to do that; the poor girl could not have done it by herself, no doubt. But I think he might have contrived to fall undermost. As it was, you see, she got her arm broken, while he escaped scot-free."

"He did his best, Gracie, you may be certain."

"Yes, indeed. I was only joking, in hopes to keep up your spirits, darling; but I think she must have loved him very much, to consent to jump with him from the carriage while it was in motion."

"I should jump with Cecil from the Monument, if he told me it was the best thing to be done," said Ella.

"Ah, that's what comes of marriage, I suppose! For my part, I think I should exercise my own discretion; or, at all events, see how it went with him before I followed his example."

"I wonder how long it will take?" said Ella, thoughtfully.

"What? To reach the ground from the top of the Monument?"

"No, no; for that telegram to get to Cecil."

"Well, he may not be there, you know—I mean, at his place of business—when the message comes."

"But where can he be else, Gracie?"

"Well, I don't know; there may be a thousand things that prevent a telegram reaching him immediately."

In the days to come, Ella often thought of these attempts of Gracie's to preserve her from anxiety and disappointment from the very first. But, alas! not the most loving care can avert the arm of Fate. Poor Ella could "settle down" to no occupation that morning; but flitted, like a ghost, from room to room—but all were rooms that looked towards the street. And yet when, about noon, the telegraph boy knocked at the door, she waited for the missive to be brought up to her, and trembled with apprehensions of she knew not what, and which only love can suggest.

"Why, Gracie, there are two telegrams!"

She opened one, and uttered a shrill cry of delight.

"Cecil is all safe!" said she. "Oh! I am so thankful!"

"I never had any fears, my darling; but what does he say?"

"'I am all right, though there was an accident to the train at Pullham. Full particulars by post to-day.'"

"Is not that just what I said, Ella? He had forgotten the news would be in the paper this morning, and did not think it worth while to telegraph."

"But there is the other message, not from Cecil at all, but from the manager of the house at Wellborough. 'I opened your telegram, thinking it might require an immediate reply. Mr. Cecil has not yet arrived, but will do so, he sends word, this afternoon. There was an accident to the train, which delayed him, but he is unhurt.' Why, what can this mean? Cecil telegraphs from Wellborough."

"Yes, my dear—but if you look at the date, you will probably find it a few minutes later. He must have arrived just after the manager had sent off his despatch."

"No; they are both dated Friday, of course, but Cecil's telegram was despatched a few minutes earlier than the other."

"Let me look at it, Ella. Ah! I see; the office this came from is at Middleton. He sent

word from there, you see, both to you and the manager."

"But what business had he at Middleton to-day? The paper says that all the passengers that were unhurt were sent on yesterday, by next train."

"Well, you will hear all that to-morrow morning, darling," said Gracie, laughing. "The main point is that your husband is none the worse for the collision, and with that, I do think you should be content."

"But he must have received some serious hurt, Gracie," persisted Ella. "He is not one to be stopped by a trifle. If it had been a mere shaking, he would still have been taken on; for that could have done him no harm."

"Very likely, my dear, it might even have done him 'good,'" laughed Gracie; "'before taken to be well shaken,' is a recommendation of the faculty. But I think I know your husband well enough to understand that the delay and discomfort at Pullham Station were not at all to his taste. He probably drove into the town, and slept at an hotel."

"Then why did he not telegraph from Pullham, instead of Middleton?"

"Nay, my dear Ella, you have now tracked

suggestion to her inmost cell,' so far as I am concerned. To-morrow morning all will be clear as daylight, and in the meantime there is nothing to fear."

CHAPTER IX.

TWO VISITORS.

A YOUNG gentleman who weighs fifty thousand pounds in the estimation of good society cannot be thrown into eight feet of water without making some splash; and it was not long before the rumour of that incident reached Ella's ears. She had not questioned her husband respecting the details of Mr. Whymper-Hobson's immersion—the subject having been painful to her, as we know, upon a collateral account—nor had he volunteered any description of it; and very much disappointed her friends were upon getting no information on the matter from what they had very naturally considered to be head-quarters. Lady Elizabeth Groves called on the very afternoon succeeding the catastrophe, with the ostensible purpose of "hearing all

about it from first to last." As the giver of the entertainment at which the mischance occurred, she deemed it her perquisite and privilege to learn the particulars of it at first hand; and, besides, it was necessary to her dear Julia's interests, as regarded Mr. Whymper-Hobson, that she should take some action in the affair. She was therefore far from pleased, on being shown up into Ella's drawing-room, to find Gracie sitting there with her friend. She had in readiness a number of questions which had been framed for a *tête-à-tête* interview, and which, if put in the presence of a third person, would require modification. She was not a person, however, inclined to alter her plans on account of obstructions that could be swept away by the brush of *brusquerie*. Indeed, for so great a lady, she was, to say truth, by no means hampered at any time by a too delicate sense of politeness.

After a few words of conventional civility, she at once observed: "I had rather hoped to find you alone this afternoon, my dear Mrs. Landon, as I had something to talk to you about."

Gracie at once rose from her chair, but Ella, with a rapid gesture, signed to her to remain.

"Gracie Ray is my intimate friend, Lady Elizabeth," said she, "and is quite cognisant

of the matter about which I conclude you wish to speak to me."

"Oh! she knows about Mr. Whymper-Hobson having been thrown in the water, does she? I think it would have been better to have spoken of that to as few people as possible."

Poor Gracie looked the picture of astonishment, as well she might, since it was the first time that she had heard of the catastrophe in question.

"She doesn't know about his being thrown into the water," observed Ella, quietly; "but she knows why it was done."

"Then be so good as to make me also your confidante in the matter," said Lady Elizabeth, promptly. "Why was it done?"

"It was all caused by his meddling with a business that did not concern him," answered Ella, dryly. The application of the remark was unmistakable, and her visitor did not affect to misunderstand it.

"The business, however, whatever it is, is certainly *my* business," returned she. "The occurrence happened, I may almost say, under my roof; and, at all events, affected one of my guests. I have a right to demand the particulars of it, Mrs. Landon, and I do demand them."

"I know nothing more of the matter, Lady Elizabeth, than your nephew told me; and the same source of information is open to you. Mr. Hobson was insolent, I believe, and my husband punished him; but he did not describe to me how it was done."

"Everybody knows, unfortunately, how it was done, Mrs. Landon. It was a positive mercy that the poor young man was not drowned; in which case, your husband would have been tried for murder. What I wish to know—and have a right to know—is, why it was done? What was the provocation given that could have—I do not say justified—but in any way accounted for, so violent an outrage? You say that Mr. Whymper was insolent—that is a very vague accusation."

"It is, however, supported by evidence. I understood from your nephew that other gentlemen, besides himself, were witnesses of Mr. Hobson's misconduct."

"Mr. Whymper-Hobson did not misconduct himself, Mrs. Landon; or, at all events, there are two opinions upon that subject. Whereas, there is no doubt that an attempt was made upon his life."

"Which is doubtless very valuable," said Ella, scornfully. "In future he will be more

careful not to risk it by scandalous and malicious observations."

"But that is the very point of the whole matter, Mrs. Landon—the question is whether they were scandalous and malicious. I am justified in stating, am I not, that they had reference to the circumstances of your marriage?"

"You are justified in believing it, Lady Elizabeth."

"And I take leave to say, Mrs. Landon," answered the other, in a louder key, "justified in much more. For the character of the ladies whom I ask to my house I am answerable to society."

"Your ladyship must have a considerable responsibility on your shoulders," answered Ella, sweetly.

"She is a regular bad one," thought her ladyship. "Her impudence is shameless." But she only observed, with dignity: "Up to yesterday, however, madam, I have never had any cause to regret my good nature. No lady, I repeat, has hitherto entered my doors on whom the breath of scandal has rested for an instant; whose conduct, whether after or before marriage, cannot bear the strictest investigation."

Her ladyship paused, not so much perhaps for a reply, as in the expectation of some out-

break. If she had been a man, one would have said of her that she enjoyed a "row" rather than otherwise; she was certainly never afraid of one.

But Ella's face showed nothing.

"This account of your friends is very satisfactory, Lady Elizabeth," said she, dryly; "indeed, considering their heterogeneous character, one might almost say, unexpectedly satisfactory."

The remark was sufficiently irritating, even as it stood, but the "heterogeneous" was too much for her ladyship; if Ella had said a "scratch lot," as others had done, she would have known what it meant, and could have borne it better.

"How dare you say such things of my friends?" cried she, in passionate tones. "You, who I don't believe were ever married at all!"

At this Ella laughed right out; a laugh that was worth fifty protestations of respectability, had not her ladyship been too angry to accept its testimony. Even as it was, however, she saw that there was something in it, and changed her ground.

"If you were married, your husband didn't know it," exclaimed she, viciously.

"Gracie," said Ella, in cold grave tones, "be good enough to touch the bell."

"I don't wish to be hard upon you, Mrs. Landon," continued her ladyship, in more con-

ciliatory tones, for she felt that she had gone too far; "but I came here for an explanation, and I must have it. That there was something wrong about your marriage there can be no doubt. It will be better for you to tell me the whole truth. Society——"

Here appeared the footman.

"Show that—lady—out," said Ella. She had been within a hair's breadth of saying "that woman."

Lady Elizabeth was fond of "scenes," and "experiences," but she felt, on her way to the front door, that she had had one experience too much.

"My dearest Ella, what have you done?" exclaimed Gracie, as soon as they were alone.

"Got rid of a friend that was not worth keeping," said Ella. She spoke with cold indifference, but the passion within her, compared with that of her late visitor, was as a Siemen's furnace is to a gas-stove.

"But she has gone away with such an erroneous impression," argued Gracie. "Would it not have been better to tell her the—how the case really stands?"

"Certainly not. She is an impertinent, insolent woman, and I owe her no sort of explanation whatsoever."

"You should know your own affairs best, dear, but you have made an enemy of her, I fear; and she will go about 'saying things,' you may depend upon it."

"No doubt she will. Fortunately everybody knows her, and therefore nobody will believe her—— There's the bell again; another visitor, come, doubtless, upon the same errand. If it is disagreeable to you to see these people, Gracie, don't stay."

"I shall certainly stay," said Gracie, loyally.

"Lady Green," announced the footman; and in walked a very different visitor from the preceding one. Lady Elizabeth was comparatively young, and still a beauty, though of a mature and Juno-like type. Lady Green was a little weazened old woman, who might in the good old times have been burnt for a witch.

"How charmingly you look, Ella," cried she, "notwithstanding your fatigues of yesterday. Miss Ray—did you say Ray, Ella?—I am delighted to make your acquaintance; all Ella's friends are my friends, are they not, my dear?"

"We have a pretty large common acquaintance, at all events," said Ella, smiling.

"Common enough some of them, eh? Did you ever see such funny people as were at the picnic? That Mr. Rufus Bond, for example?"

"They say he owns half South America," said Ella.

"Does he, indeed? Then he must have a house there somewhere, and I wish he would live upon his property. I didn't think much of Miss Julia's young man that is to be. Did you?"

"I didn't know she had a young man."

"No more she has at present; but Lady Elizabeth has bespoken one for her—Mr. Whymper-Hobson."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Ella, with an unexpected touch of interest.

This was the cause, then, of Lady Elizabeth's severity! She had been taking up the cudgels for her future nephew-in-law, in order to ingratiate herself and her Julia with that young gentleman. Ella had been so full of her own trouble on the day in question that her usually quick observation had failed to detect her hostess's manœuvres, but now all was plain enough. She had not done her ladyship the injustice of crediting her with a disinterested indignation in the cause of social morality, but had set down her behaviour to mere inquisitiveness.

"Oh yes, she looks upon the affair as good as settled. She has caught him young, you see, before he has felt his wings; and if I had a daughter or a niece I should not envy her her

catch. The lad looks to me like a barber's block, though he can't be that, or he would have floated, wouldn't he? My dear Ella, what made that dear delightful husband of yours throw him into Virginia Water?"

Lady Green was one of those persons whose genuine good-nature protects them from the consequences of "naturalness." If you could have said of her, without a bull, that she always spoke without thinking, and said exactly what she thought, that would accurately have described her character. She had strong opinions, though they had certainly not been induced by reflection; and since Ella had run counter to them she had not hesitated, upon many occasions, to reprove her; nay, as we have seen, she had even spoken to Cecil upon the subject in the most maternal fashion. With most persons who had taken any such liberty Ella would have been very angry, but with Lady Green's *naïveté* it was as difficult to be angry as with the candour of a child. Though Ella was by this time fully cognisant of the hostility she was likely to meet with from Lady Elizabeth on account of this very matter, and of the grave influence it must needs have on her future relations with society, she could not restrain a smile at the point-blank question of the old lady's: "Why did your dear de-

lightful husband put Mr. Whymper-Hobson in the water?"

"He was very impertinent, Lady Green," said she, "and impertinent to me, which, of course, my husband could not stand."

"That's just what my Frank says." Frank was her nephew, in the Guards, who had been one of the guests at the picnic on the previous day. "Hobson was injudicious in selecting Cecil Landon, of all men in the world, to say unpleasant things to about his wife, and still more foolish to choose the waterside for the communication."

"Your ladyship and Mr. Green seem to be already acquainted with the particulars," observed Ella, dryly.

The thought that her late confession to her husband had been made the subject of debate by others, even before it had passed her own lips, was very galling to her.

"Of course we are acquainted with them so far, my dear. Everybody knows that Mr. Hobson took upon himself to rally Mr. Landon upon the subject of his marriage, but nobody knows what was queer about it. That it was something more than a runaway match—at all events of the usual kind—is generally agreed. Some say you ran away with Mr. Landon; others say he tried to

impose upon you by a mock marriage. Others again go so far as to say——"

"What?" asked Ella; she looked so pale and grim, that the garrulous old dame had suddenly pulled up in unaccustomed alarm. "What do 'others again say?'" repeated Ella, imperiously.

"Well, my dear Ella, people will say anything, you know, except their prayers. I am not speaking my own ideas upon the subject. Frank says that he will bet five to two that you are as 'straight as a die,' that's his expression. And he is not a young man to bet odds unless he feels almost certain."

"Almost certain, do you mean, Lady Green, that I am an honest woman?" inquired Ella, speaking very slowly and deliberately.

"Well, no—— There can be no doubt of that, of course. Frank means—— But there, you shall come and dine with us—some day—you and Miss Ray too—and you shall get it all out of him yourself."

To this unpromising proposition Ella did not condescend to reply; but it did not escape her that the invitation, such as it was, was indefinite. Lady Green was a hospitable old lady, and when she asked folks to dinner was always wont to name her days.

"The fact is," she went on, "so far as Frank is concerned, although he is a stanch friend of yours, my dear, the matter has made the strongest impression upon him in its humorous aspect. He says it was just like his luck to have missed seeing your husband throw Whymper-Hobson in, and then the others throwing the sweep after Whymper-Hobson."

"The sweep!—what sweep?" asked Ella.

"How should I know? A sweep who could swim, at all events, and whom they sent in after him, like a retriever. I thought Frank would have expired with laughter, when he was talking to me about that sweep."

"I think it must have been an oar," observed Gracie, quietly; "a long oar is sometimes called a sweep."

"Is it, indeed, my dear?" said her ladyship. "Then that explains what I thought so funny—that they took no trouble about the poor sweep when it was all over, just because he was a poor man, and this Hobson has fifty thousand pounds. He doesn't look like a gentleman to my mind, and Frank says he is a prig, if not a sneak. Now, if he is a sneak, he is not likely to have spoken the truth about your marriage."

"If he said anything which would imply that

my marriage was not a valid and a proper one, he told a wicked and malicious lie," said Ella, gravely.

"Just so; now that is so perfectly satisfactory. I felt sure it would be so, my dear; and, as I say, Frank even offered to bet five to two upon it. You are not one to deceive an old friend like me, I know—especially when the whole thing must come out sooner or later. I don't quite understand, however, what was a little amiss in the affair, even now. You both married under false names, I believe."

"We did no such thing, Lady Green, and I cannot permit you, or any other person, to suggest it," said Ella, haughtily.

"Quite right. 'You will find she will stand to her guns,' said my nephew Frank; and so you have done. It is such a relief to my mind that I have your authority to contradict all these rumours." Here she rose from her chair, and her hostess rang the bell.

"I have ventured to assert upon my own responsibility, my dear Ella, that your husband has not left town for fear of Mr. Whymper-Hobson taking vengeance upon him."

"I think you may say that much, Lady Green. I don't think Cecil was ever afraid of anybody."

"Quite so; so courageous and also so affectionate; I don't know a young husband so devoted. It isn't as if he had got tired of you, as Frank says, in which case he might have cut the painter; taken advantage, he means, of any informality in your marriage contract. Even if it was ever so wrong, you know—especially as you have no children—you have only got to marry again, and there you are. Good morning, my dears, and God bless you."

The blessing escaped Ella's ears, but not the remark that had preceded it, and which wounded all the worse for the lightness of the speaker's tone. She looked like one to whom a blow has been given, and who dares not return it. Now that the occasion for it had departed, all her courage had fled.

"My darling Ella, that good lady meant no harm," said Gracie, consolingly. "If she meant anything, she meant good."

"It is not she that I fear, Gracie; she is but the mouthpiece of others, who have not her good nature. I shall be the target for the public scorn."

"You will live it down, my darling, and that soon, since you have done nothing really wrong—at least, nothing such as your enemies would impute to you. It must seem so hard, I know it must, to you who have been so happy."

"No, Gracie, I have not been happy." The tone in which these words were spoken went straight to Gracie's heart.

"But only about this business, Ella, surely?" said she, throwing herself on her knees beside her.

"No—there is nothing else, only about this business," answered Ella, with hesitation. "But it was never out of my mind. I knew that this blow must fall some day."

"Poor darling," murmured the other.

"'I was not in safety, neither had I rest, neither was I quiet; yet trouble came.' Oh, how true that is, Gracie."

"Yes, it comes from the Book of Job. I have known one who has suffered as evil things as he did, though of another sort; and who was never rewarded; and yet who did not complain."

Ella knew that Gracie was talking of her mother, but she answered nothing. Her own troubles monopolised her wholly. Moreover, Mrs. Ray was out of the reach of trouble. For the first time in her young life—for even yet she was very young—Ella wished that she was dead likewise.

CHAPTER X.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

Well was it for Ella Landon, in that time of trial and trouble, that she was not alone, and, above all, that such a friend as Gracie Ray was with her. Gracie possessed all the loving sympathy that a woman looks for when in trouble, and was not chary of exhibiting it; and, in addition, she had strong common sense, which Ella lacked. It was by her advice that her hostess denied herself to no caller upon that terrible day, but met them all—and they were many—with a resolute front. To have refused to see them would have been, if not a confession of wrong-doing, at all events a sign of weakness; and it was above all things necessary that Ella should show no such sign. For herself—as to what these people thought or said of her—she was indifferent; but for her husband's sake it behoved her to be

wise as a serpent, that she might seem harmless as a dove.

"You have put me in a very unpleasant position," he had said; and it was now plain enough he had spoken truly. It was therefore her duty to do all that in her lay to extricate him from it.

She had been unable to avoid a breach with Lady Elizabeth. Not for one instant would she permit a slur upon her own fair fame and her husband's honour; but with the rest she had done her best to be conciliatory. Lady Green, for one, was favourably disposed towards her, and there was Frank Green the Guardsman—a very popular young fellow—to stand up for her. It was a question, however, whether the latter ally would be advantageous. A woman's case is not enviable when men take up her cause against women. The best she could hope for, for the present, was to have the majority of her female friends upon her side. Terrible as it was to acknowledge it, she confessed to herself that it was a comfort to her that her husband was away, and out of hearing of the scandals of which she was conscious of being the subject. If he took it in hand to avenge her it would now be necessary to throw half London into the water.

Never had Gracie and she been so confidential together as they were upon that unhappy evening,

yet not one word did Ella drop of any doubt of her husband's love ; nor, indeed, could she now be said to doubt it. Matters had come to that sad pass with her that she could not believe that, in addition to all her troubles, the consolation of his love should be denied her. One does not understand, in youth, how misfortune can follow on misfortune as wave comes after wave—save that there is no ebb. It is only the old who know how pitiless Fate can be. That Gracie thought very seriously of Ella's misdoing in that matter of the false name she did not attempt to conceal, and it was well that this was so ; for her friend's disapproval afforded Ella some sort of measure of the feeling which would be entertained against her by those who were not her friends. She had so smoothed the matter over in her own mind, that she would otherwise have been unable to regard it from their point of view at all, and would have resented even the advances of those who were inclined to be her partisans—since they still blamed her—with impatience and indignation. Her position was, in fact, extremely difficult ; she could not bring herself to tell these people the whole truth. To reveal the story of her quarrel with her father would be, perhaps, after all, but to give them a new subject for scandalous talk, and even if she had felt sure of its acceptance, she

would have shrunk from such a disclosure; and yet, if she refused any explanation, it would seem, even to her friends, suspicious.

Under these circumstances such an adviser and consoler as she found in Gracie was invaluable indeed.

But for all that, where she looked for comfort most was from her husband. She was up and about, next morning, hours before the post came that was to bring his promised letter; and when it came—at breakfast-time, as usual—her emotion was such that her fingers could scarcely open the envelope. Gracie, in her tender discretion, had hidden herself behind *The Times*, and there remained waiting for her friend to speak. So long a time, however, passed by in silence that, at last, she ventured to look up at her. Ella was staring straight before her, with a strange look of woe and wonder in her eyes, and with the letter crumpled up in her hand.

"What is the matter, dear Ella? Is there bad news?"

"There is news I do not understand," said Ella, in hard, unyielding tones. "Read it," and she put the letter in her hand. "Read it aloud, please."

Gracie hesitated for a moment, and then obeyed her.

"Wellborough, Friday.

"My dear Ella,—I did not get here in time to write to you by yesterday's post. I could not have accomplished it in any case, I believe; but as it happened there was a breakdown on the road, and, indeed, what might have been a very serious accident. Our branch-line train was run into by the up-express, and a good many people were injured. As you will learn by my telegram of to-day, however, I escaped unhurt, except for a bit of a shaking. The points were turned on wrong by some poor devil, who, I suppose, as usual, had been sixteen hours at his post; but I spare you the details, which you will read *in extenso* in the newspapers. I have not seen Montague, our late manager, yet, but from what I hear I have got a good deal of work cut out for me. It may not, however, necessarily be at the office; and, on the whole, it will be better for you to direct to me at the Eagle Hotel, which will be my head-quarters. I am very glad to think that Miss Gracie is with you; pray give her my kindest regards. Imagine me alone in a second-class hotel of a country town, and be thankful for your own lot. At the same time I am truly glad that you are not with me. I shall get through my business all the quicker,

though, as I have said, I expect it will be a long job.—Your affectionate husband,

"CECIL LANDON."

"What is your explanation of that letter?" said Ella, when her friend had finished.

"My explanation, dear Ella? What do you mean?"

Gracie had a vague idea that it was the tone of the letter with which her friend was dissatisfied; and certainly it did not strike her as being the sort of communication she would herself have liked to have received from an absent husband. Still, there was nothing in it that to her mind required any explanation in the usual sense of the word. Its meaning seemed plain enough.

"Look at the date, Gracie. 'Friday. I did not get here in time to write to you by yesterday's post,' he says. He means it to be inferred that he reached Wellborough on Thursday night; yet Mr. Montague's telegram informed us he had not arrived yesterday morning."

"That is easily explained, Ella. He got in late, and went straight to the hotel; then, being doubtless very tired, he did not go down to the office till some time after it was opened. The manager therefore concluded that he had not arrived."

"But Cecil's telegram of yesterday is dated Middleton."

"To be sure; I had forgotten that," said Gracie. "Perhaps he went to Middleton on business before he went to his office."

"Middleton is thirty miles from Wellborough, Gracie; and besides, if he had business there, why did he not stop there on his way down?"

"Perhaps he did," said Gracie. "He says he got 'a bit of a shaking,' and after leaving Pullham he might have felt the effects of the accident, and thought it better to stay at Middleton than to proceed that night. He did not tell you all that lest he should make you anxious, but telegraphed to the manager—as Mr. Montague says—and also to yourself."

"That may be so," said Ella, thoughtfully, and her set face began to soften a little. "It is just possible."

"Of course it is, and there are plenty of such possibilities. Whatever inconsistency may appear in your husband's letter, Ella, should be surely set down to his credit, so far, at least, as you are concerned. In my opinion it is always safest, as well as best, to be straightforward; but if his care for you has suggested another course, it is very ungrateful to find fault with him."

"I found no fault with him," said Ella.

"You looked very displeased, my dear, just as though you suspected something; and yet, what could you suspect?"

It was upon the tip of Ella's tongue to cry out, with bitterness: "Ah, you are not married;" for, in fact, she was consumed with doubts and jealousies of she knew not what, or whom. She felt sure that there was deception somewhere; and the tone of her husband's letter aggravated her suspicions. He seemed to wish to prepare her for an absence of indefinite duration. And "My dear Ella" and "Your affectionate husband" were not the loving terms which he was accustomed to use in his correspondence with her. It was cruel of him to make her feel, now that he was away from her, that things were different between them.

She was irritated and wretched, and ill at ease, but she regretted that she had given the impression to Gracie of having any want of confidence in Cecil. Matters must be bad indeed when a woman complains to her female friend—and she unmarried—of the conduct of her husband.

"I suspect nothing, dear Gracie," said she, in answer to her friend's question. "'Suspect' is not, of course, the word to apply to Cecil. But I felt aggrieved, I confess, that he should have had any concealments from me, even for my own

good, as he may have thought it; it is treating one like a child. However, it was doubtless foolish to be so 'put out,' and not very civil to you, my dear. Some guests would have felt 'huffy.'"

"Never you mind me, dear Ella. I am not likely to feel 'huffy,' as you call it, and you on your part must not be 'huffy,' if I speak quite frankly upon matters on which you think proper to consult me."

"That means to say," said Ella, smiling, "that you want to give me a scolding."

"Not a scolding, Ella; but I do think that you are inclined to be rather hard upon your husband."

"I hard upon Cecil?"

There was a world of affection in her tone that witnessed for her beyond any protestations.

"Does love then make one hard?"

"It sometimes makes one exacting. It seems to me that you have disturbed yourself quite unnecessarily, for example, about this letter from your husband. When he comes home, he will probably make everything that now appears to you mysterious quite clear in half-a-dozen words."

"You are right, my dear," said Ella, rising and embracing her friend. "I was going to worry him for an explanation, but now he shall

be let off, and only begged to come home as quickly as he can. What a model wife you will make, Gracie, when Mr.—— Mr. Right has had the luck to win you."

Certainly Gracie was a great comfort to her friend in those first days of doubt.

CHAPTER XI.

CECIL'S RETURN.

THERE is a pretty little story of an Irish gentleman who was asked to dine and sleep at a friend's house, and who remained there five-and-forty years; and to this in after times, in intervals of sunshine, Gracie Ray would playfully refer when speaking of her residence with Ella. She had been invited, it is true, for a more indefinite period than her Hibernian prototype, nor did she stay quite so long; but the parallel held good in some respects, and especially in the all-important one that she didn't tire out her welcome.

Days and weeks rolled on, and still Cecil Landon did not return to his wife and home. The Wellborough manager had left soon after his arrival, and he was "up to his elbows," he wrote, in the dyeing vats. Nor did he express any objections to the calling that had formerly

been so hateful to him. His letters were affectionately, if not lovingly, worded; but to Ella's sensitive ear—for she would often read them aloud to herself, before she sought her lonely pillow—even the affection seemed forced and strained. There was never the least allusion to what she felt to be the cause of their altered style. She would almost have preferred that he should have reproached her, that she might have opened her heart to him, no matter whether in self-defence or in self-accusation; but as it was, he gave her no opportunity of appealing to him. To all her entreaties for his return, he had replied that she might surely take it for granted that he would come home as soon as circumstances permitted; nay, once he had even had the cruelty to hint that it did not become her to be impatient, since the business which detained him was one in which, but for her, he would never have been engaged at all. To this she answered nothing, but it prevented her from urging his return, which she sometimes thought to herself, with bitter sadness, was the very effect he desired to produce.

This little "rift within the lute," that had robbed her home-life of its music, was, she felt, widening day by day, and she had no power to remedy it. Only next to seeing the requisite provision for our dear ones diminishing day by day,

and the pitiful looking forward to the inevitable hour when they shall be in want, with none to help them, is the consciousness of the loosening of the bonds of love. To the truly loving heart, indeed, the pangs of starvation may, in such a case, be said to have already begun. The duration of the process may, however, be indefinitely long. Sometimes a reaction would occur. A phrase, or even a word, in her husband's letter would kindle the fading embers of hope. She would endeavour to persuade herself that there was after all not much amiss; a few weeks, or even a few months, might be absolutely necessary for the rearrangement of an important business; when Cecil once undertook an affair, it was his wont to do it thoroughly; no doubt her presence at Wellborough would tend to retard rather than hasten matters; and when at last her husband did come home, he would—it was surely reasonable to conclude—make up for his lengthened absence by an unwonted devotion.

At other times she would feel very bitter and resentful, and as the long weeks dragged on, this became unhappily her more usual frame of mind. Like the genius shut up in the bottle, in the Arabian tale, she had been at first inclined to conciliation if Cecil would only return, and release her from her solitary imprisonment; but now she

felt that, even in that case, she would not have much cause for self-congratulation, and that he had earned small welcome at her hands. This upas tree of change and coldness, nourished by continuous droppings of neglect, is, however, in kindly soil, but of slow growth. It is not too much to say that at no time would it have been impossible for Cecil to have brought the love-light once again into those tear-worn eyes, by a few lines of genuine tenderness, in which she would have recognised him as of old. But those lines were never written, and, on the other hand, it was become but too plain to her that, no matter how tenderly she wrote, the words never reached his heart. Indeed it seemed as though, when she endeavoured thus to move him, he purposely ignored the attempt. To an ordinary reader of her husband's letters, this idea might have appeared fanciful; but the eye of love is not easily deceived, unless it desires to be so, and poor Ella, alas! had passed the stage of self-deception, and almost reached that point wherein she would fain know the worst.

Six weeks had now elapsed since her husband had gone down to Wellborough, and still his letters, which came regularly enough—indeed they were so like one another, and were despatched at such equal intervals, that she had

bitterly written to him that he treated her like a business correspondent—contained no word of his return. He spoke as before of the pressing nature of affairs at the West-country office, but dropped no hint of their becoming less urgent.

In this strait, and contrary to Gracie's advice, Ella resolved upon appealing to Mr. Landon, senior. Gracie still took the more hopeful side of the matter, though her confidence in Cecil was greatly shaken, and she thought his conduct both inconsiderate and unkind. She said: "If I were in your place, dear Ella, nothing should induce me to call in a third party to settle any disagreement between myself and my husband—though, if it must be done, I allow that his own father is the fittest person to select. What I should do, if I felt the unhappy distrust which it is evident you entertain—and in which I still do not think you are justified—is to go down to Wellborough yourself. Letter-writing is well enough, and indeed the best plan possible in case of all ordinary misunderstandings; but between husband and wife, pen and paper are very unsatisfactory substitutes for words, and tone, and looks. Go down to him, Ella, with your 'heart upon your sleeve.'"

"For him to peck at," broke in Ella, passionately. "No, Gracie, he shall not do that. If it

is not worth his while to come to me, neither will I stir a step towards him. Should the presence of a wife be requisite to remind her husband of her existence? No, it would be a humiliation both to him and me," she added vaguely.

The fact was, she was not only too proud to take such a course, but afraid to venture upon the experiment, lest it should reveal some wrong-doing upon Cecil's part. Like most women who have loving natures, Ella was inclined to be jealous upon very slight grounds, and the grounds in this instance could hardly be called slight. There must certainly be some attraction to keep Cecil so long in a country town, which he had himself described as dull and uninteresting, and when the occupation with which he was supposed to be engaged was notoriously unsuited to his taste. Moreover—and in this poor Ella felt lay the chief danger—Cecil had parted from her in no affectionate mood, and with a root of bitterness against her in his heart. She feared therefore to go to Wellborough, though at the same time she yearned to win her husband back to her by any means.

The latter fact Gracie well understood, but she had no suspicion of the former. Ella had opened her heart to her friend, by this time, as

to the relations between herself and Cecil, but not all her heart; that secret chamber of it was still closed, which is, and should be, the last to be opened to human eyes—the one which held the suspicion of her husband's fidelity. And Gracie, who had not had the advantage of mixing in fashionable society, did not even suspect its existence. Her advice, therefore, was, in a measure, given in the dark, and occasionally met by arguments which seemed weak to her, because the root of them was hidden from her view. If her friend shrank from going to Wellborough, she thought it was through an unfounded fear of her husband's anger.

"I am sure he will forgive you, darling," she said, "because he will understand that it was your love for him that caused you to take such a step."

"I do not need his forgiveness; it is he who needs mine," replied Ella, haughtily. "As to my love, he is well assured of it, and yet it moves him not at all."

"I would not speak to his father, dear," said Gracie, ignoring this bitter speech; "first, for the reason I have mentioned about third parties; and, secondly, because in the present case you are placed at a disadvantage. Remember it was contrary to your father-in-law's wishes or, at all

events, his advice, that your marriage took place. In his ignorance of your feelings, and also, generally, of the matter in hand—for Mr. Landon is not, I should say, a person of much sentiment—he will perhaps reply: 'This is only what I expected, and what must be looked for in all such boy-and-girl marriages. You have made your own bed and must lie on it.' If I were you, Ella, I would not give him the opportunity of saying anything disagreeable of that kind."

It must be confessed that Gracie had not a very favourable opinion of Mr. Landon, senior; she had not quite forgiven his behaviour towards her upon that memorable occasion in Wethermill Street. Ella understood this, but, nevertheless, she felt the strength of her friend's argument. It would be a humiliation to her, only second to that which she had in her mind, to seem to confess that her marriage had been a failure to the very man who had in a manner foretold it.

"I tell you what, Gracie," said she, suddenly, "it is you who shall write to Cecil."

"I? *I* write to your husband to complain of his conduct to his own wife! I am sure you cannot be serious, Ella?"

"I am serious enough, Heaven knows, Gracie. I don't wish you to complain of him, however; I want you to write as if of your own mind, and not

at my suggestion at all, to tell him what is the simple truth: that his continued absence—and especially the indefinite extent of it—is making me very wretched. It will be an unpleasant thing to do, dear, but how much more unpleasant must it be for me—his wife—to ask it of you?"

And poor Ella burst into a flood of tears.

Gracie was shocked and frightened, as well as deeply pained; for this catastrophe was also a revelation. There are some tears—those from "the depths of a divine despair"—in which, the poet tells us, there is mystery; but there are others which disclose more than words can tell. Those that flowed from Ella's eyes were of the latter kind, and revealed to her friend the full extremity of her woe.

"I will do anything you please," said Gracie, tenderly.

"Then write to him, dear," sobbed Ella; "I don't wish to see the letter; tell him what you please, only let it be something that will bring him back to me."

No confession of her own incompetency to effect that object could have been more ample and exhaustive, no cup more bitter, it seemed to her, could ever be presented to her lips, than that she drained as she spoke those words.

"I will write to-day, darling," was all that

Gracie replied to them, and she did write; though never had she penned a letter more uncongenial to her mind, or which cost her such pains to compass. She scarcely knew how to address the husband of her friend, and much less what to say. At last she composed the following:

"[Private and confidential.]

"DEAR MR. LANDON,—I take the liberty of addressing you upon a subject that certainly does not lie within my province, and for venturing upon which you may very reasonably blame me; nevertheless, since I do it out of affection for your wife, I have good hope of your forgiveness. Ever since I have been with her, but more especially during these last weeks, she has been very unhappy. I could not help observing it, and I cannot now refrain from informing you of the fact. It is mainly owing, there is no doubt, to your long absence, and to the indefinite terms in which you speak of your return. Of course you are the best judge of your own affairs, and of the claims that business may have upon you, but if they be not very urgent, I think they should be postponed, or settled as soon as possible, for your wife's sake. I am very glad to be with her; but I feel that I am, in her eyes, a wretched substitute indeed for yourself.

"Again apologising to you for what I fear you will think an unjustifiable interference,—I am, yours very truly,

"GRACIE RAY."

Gracie was by no means satisfied with this piece of composition, but it was to her mind the best out of many efforts, and in order that no servants' gossip might be aroused by the circumstance of her writing to their master, she posted it with her own hand.

"The invention of letters," as the historians term it, is, upon the whole, no doubt, beneficial to the human race; but it has brought with it many evils. In old times, for example, that hateful form of selfishness—the not answering one's correspondent—could not have been exhibited. It is quite an extraordinary and morbid growth; for no man would dare to be so brutal as not to answer if one spoke to him; and yet, when the question is really important enough to be put in black and white, he does not reply. And again, even worse—in its effect, at least—than the not writing a letter which we ought to write, is the writing a letter which we ought not to write. What agonies have men and women—especially women—endured after letting a letter slip through their fingers into the post-

office, which ought to have been kept outside it and torn up! How often, if they had waited but twenty-four hours longer, would they have "thought better of it," or would the necessity—as they foolishly imagined it to be—for their sending it have been shown not to exist? A spoken word may be recalled, but the *manet* of the *litera scripta* is irrevocable. Sometimes a telegram is sent after the fatal missive: "Tear up my communication of this day, I beseech you, without reading it." But human nature is weak, and one can never be sure that the wish has been complied with. In the case of Gracie's note, one would have thought there could have been no harm done; yet, directly she had posted it, she was sorry that it had gone—not on her own account, of course, but on Ella's. And Ella, though she declined to be acquainted with its contents, was sorry also. If her friend had written: "I send this without your wife's knowledge," she would have been better satisfied; but Gracie's sense of right had not permitted her, she knew, to make that statement; and now Cecil would be sure to lay it to her own instigation. These misgivings became bitter regrets when a note arrived from Cecil the next morning to announce his return on that very day.

"DEAR ELLA,—You will see me to-morrow, before dinner-time. In great haste.—Yours affectionately,

"CECIL LANDON."

His words were brief indeed, and by no means so loving as they might have been; but he was coming home. Both the women felt that a great mistake had been made.

"Will he have got my letter before he leaves Wellborough?" asked Gracie, anxiously.

"I am afraid so, dear; it is very unfortunate; though, after all, it will only tell him the truth."

"But the truth is sometimes so unpalatable. Don't you think, Ella, it will be better that I should be away somewhere—out of the house, I mean—when your husband arrives? I can scarcely go back home, without notice, I fear; else I do think that would be the best plan."

"It is not to be thought of, Gracie. It is a great comfort to me that you are here."

It was indeed. To say truth, it was on the tip of her tongue to ask Gracie to be with her in the drawing-room when her husband arrived. She was a prey to cruel presentiments. Her only ground for solace was that he was coming

of his own free will, or at least at her request, and not in consequence of her friend's intercession. By the help of Bradshaw they found out the time of his arrival, and Gracie set out for a walk as the hour drew nigh. Then Ella waited by herself in the drawing-room, consumed with anxiety, apprehension, dissatisfaction — as she had never thought to have waited for her Cecil. From behind the window curtain she saw his hansom drive up to the door, and noticed the glance he cast up at the upper floor. To her fevered fancy it was not a glance of loving expectation. It was the look rather of the truant schoolboy, uncertain or apprehensive of the character of his reception. Should she run down and reassure him with a loving welcome, as she had been wont to do on similar occasions? No; there would be the servant in the hall, and servants' eyes are keen to mark the least thing amiss between their master and mistress. She would wait where she was. He was, or seemed to her to be, a long time below, giving orders or asking questions, which was not his wont, and then his step came up the stairs, not three at a time, nor even two, as she had known it, but with a slow, deliberate footfall, such as might have belonged to his father.

"Well, Ella, how are you? How is Gracie?"

She had run towards him as he entered, and he had kissed her cheek; but his arms had not encircled her. He had a book and some newspapers in his hand, which might seem his excuse for that omission; but she felt at once that this cold greeting was designed.

"You have been absent from me a long time, Cecil," she said piteously, "and do not seem to be very glad to see me even now."

"I am very glad, my dear; but I am also very hungry and very tired. The train was behind time, and endeavoured to make up for it by cutting short its stoppages for refreshment."

How haggard and worn he looked; and what a strange embarrassment there was in his tone and manner! A sudden hope illumined her—a hope based upon strange ground indeed—that perhaps illness had been the cause both of his absence and his reticence.

"You have not been ill, my darling, have you?"

"Ill! not I," he answered, with an unjoyous laugh. "What makes you think of such a thing?"

"That terrible accident, Cecil. I feared that perhaps you had been more hurt than you liked to tell me."

His brow darkened visibly.

"Oh, the railway accident! I had almost forgotten that. I only got a little shaking. Where is your friend Gracie?"

"She is out, thinking that you would like to be alone with me, at our first meeting after so many weeks; but perhaps she is mistaken."

He ignored the bitterness of the speech, but not the speech itself.

"I am sorry she should have been driven out on my account," said he, indifferently.

"Oh Cecil, what is it?" cried Ella, passionately, all the barriers of her pride broken down by a great and sudden fear. "You are playing a part with me; I am sure you are. You are trying to steel your heart against me, Heaven only knows why."

Cecil's face grew very troubled, though it did not darken as before. He dropped the papers from his hand and looked at her in a strange, pitiful way.

"Playing a part," he murmured; "why should I play a part?"

"That is what I ask," she said. "I do not know what is in your mind; but you cannot hide from me that there is something. Let your own conscience tell you whether it should be there or not. Do you think that you can deceive me—me, your wife?"

He shuddered, and his pale face grew paler and more drawn.

"Is it possible, Cecil, that you regret I am your wife?"

"I did not say so," returned he, hoarsely. "What makes you ask such things? I am come home, only for a short time—I will tell you about that afterwards; but, at all events, after a long absence; and you receive me with reproaches."

"No, Cecil; the reproaches came from your own heart. I did not mean even to be cold. I do not feel cold towards you. Oh no! no! But something has come between us, Cecil. What is it?"

He did not speak, though his lips trembled a little. His eyes were fixed upon the carpet.

"Is it that you still feel bitter against me for my deception at our marriage?" she went on. "I had hoped that that was over. Not that I deserved to escape so easily, but because I thought you loved me, and because to Love forgiveness is so easy. Have you had trouble about it, dearest, from that man Whymper, or anybody?"

"There has been trouble of course," answered Cecil. "People have written to me about it; this Whymper-Hobson's friends, I mean."

"Lady Elizabeth, I suppose; she called here."

"Well, she and others have written. I told them if the sneak wanted satisfaction he should have enough of it. It is not that, of course."

"I am sure of that, Cecil." Even in that hour of doubt, nay, almost of despair, as to her husband's love, she could feel a gleam of pride in the consciousness of his courage.

"It has been a very unfortunate business altogether."

"Of course it has; but it need not embitter our lives; nor does it, Cecil. What is doing that is something else. Good heavens, what have I done, that you should treat me thus?"

"You have done nothing, Ella; at least, nothing more than what we know about; and I think the less said upon that subject the sooner mended. It is almost dinner-time, and I must go and dress."

He turned and went upstairs into his dressing-room, where she heard him lock the door behind him. He need not have done that, for though it had been her loving wont on such occasions to unpack his portmanteau with her own hands, and see that everything was ready for him with her own eyes, she would not have ventured to do so now. Even had that material

obstacle of the locked door not been interposed, she would have felt shut out from him enough.

She sank down in the chair by which he had stood, so cold and strange throughout their interview, and burying her face in her hands, recalled it word for word, and tone for tone. There had been a moment—she felt sure of this—when he had all but given way to her appeal, and thrown his arms around her; but that moment seemed now gone for ever; the rest of the time he had been acting a part very unsuited to his character; angry he might have been, but not indifferent, and indifference was what he had throughout affected. Some husbands are not demonstrative, and behave to their wives much as they do to other people; but that was not Cecil's way. A horrible idea struck her, that he might have desired an excuse for more ill-conduct; for absenting himself from her still more, for example; and indeed he had hinted of such an intention. Upon one thing she was resolved, that she would give him no such pretext; but beyond that she knew not what to do. The opportunity for an explanation had for the present passed away, and indeed he had as good as refused to give her any. She felt well convinced that he would not come downstairs, or see her, until dinner-time, when Gracie would be with them. Indeed, a knock at the

front door at that moment announced her friend's return. She felt that she could not see her—that she must be alone with her wretchedness since her husband left her so—and hurried up to her own room. She paused at his door, as she passed by it, but not a sound was to be heard; he, too, was doubtless thinking of their late interview, and making plans for his future behaviour—to what end? He, at least, knew what he had in view, but as for her—Heaven help her!—she knew nothing.

Had not her maid come up as usual to help her to dress, she would have forgotten to do so; for her mind was dazed, and she felt incapable of the least exertion. When her toilette was completed, and the maid dismissed, she waited for her husband to go downstairs; she heard his door unlocked, and then his step outside it; would he come in and see her? No, he ran quickly down into the drawing-room, where Gracie had already made her appearance, for she heard their voices beneath her. Then she went down herself and joined them.

There are many occasions in which it is difficult to make conversation; between two foreigners, for example, who do not understand one another's language, and to whom you have to interpret; and still worse (as once happened

within my experience), between two foreigners of the same nation, one of whom is debarred from using his native tongue, from the circumstance of his being a Pole by adoption and a spy by trade. But perhaps the most embarrassing position in which "articulately-speaking man" can be placed is when he is one of a party of three, whereof the other two are a married couple, who are not on speaking terms with one another. It was Gracie's fate upon the present occasion to play this unenviable part. It was easy to perceive that if her host and hostess were not "at daggers drawn," there was but an armed peace between them. Their characters did not admit of "nagging," or of talking at one another; it was not possible for them to descend to that lowest depth of domestic discord, which consists in endeavouring to make the third party their ally against one another. But both Cecil and Ella talked independently, and would pursue no common topic. Ella, indeed, scarcely talked at all. The stage of conciliation was well-nigh passed with her, and the presence of Gracie aggravated her sense of wrong. Slights and insults have thrice the venom in them when inflicted before a witness, and the coldness of a husband, that can be borne in private without a shudder, sinks to freezing-point when displayed in public. Cecil's talk was studiously in-

different, yet he could hardly avoid some reference to the causes of his long absence from home.

"I never knew what work was, my dear Miss Ray, I do assure you, till I went down to Wellborough. Country folks take twice as long to take in an idea, even a business idea, as we do in town."

"Thank you, Mr. Landon," said Gracie, laughing.

On ordinary occasions Ella would have certainly struck gaily in on behalf of her friend, but she maintained an icy silence.

"Oh, I don't call Woolwich the country," said Cecil. "Everybody within the Postal District partakes of the civilisation of Cockaigne. But at Wellborough dulness reigns. The simplest order remains unexecuted for a week. If I had had to do with London folks, I should have broken the neck of what I have to do by this time, but, as it is, I shall have to go back again almost immediately. Indeed, I should not have returned to-day, if it had not been absolutely necessary to see my father."

Gracie, of course, understood that this was Cecil's method of breaking the fact to his wife that he was going away from home again.

But Ella said nothing, only went on pretending to eat, but in reality, poor soul, eating next

to nothing. Cecil, too, on his part, "marked time" with his knife and fork, rather than made progress with his meal.

"The fact is," continued he, looking down upon his plate, "if the governor insists upon my doing the work of the late manager, I shall have more or less to live at Wellborough, and that is by no means a pleasant prospect."

"Not in the winter, perhaps, Mr. Landon, but in weather like this, and especially as the summer comes on, I should think that Ella and you would prefer the country to London." This well-meant attempt of Gracie's to bring her friend into the conversation was a total failure. When Ella spoke, it was upon a wholly different matter.

"You heard from home by the afternoon's post, did you not, Gracie?"

"Yes, a few lines from my father."

"And how is the Commissary?" inquired Cecil.

"Oh, quite well; but he speaks of Colonel Juxon having had a twinge of gout."

This allusion to the Colonel was unfortunate. It was from his house that her host and hostess had been married; and it was he who had played into Ella's hands, with respect to the retention of her false name.

"Has anything been seen of Darall by the Woolwich folks?" inquired Cecil; rather a trying question for poor Gracie, though she felt that even it was better than the intolerable silence that had succeeded her last remark.

"My father does not say so," said Gracie, blushing; "but of course he does not go much about, scarcely anywhere, indeed, except to"—she was just going to say "the Colonel's," but stopped herself in time, and substituted—"to the Commandant's."

"That must be a little dull for him, I should think," said Cecil, "if the hospitalities there are confined, as they used to be, to 'a little music,' and sherry and sandwiches. I can't think how people can ask their fellow-creatures to such entertainments. For my part, I hate moving after dinner, and that reminds me that I must see the governor to-night. We shall have a great deal to talk over, and I may be very late, so I think it will be better, Ella, to have the bed in my dressing-room made up, that I may not disturb you."

"Very good," said Ella.

"But why don't you go at once, Mr. Landon," said Gracie, "now that we have finished dinner? We will excuse your coming up into the drawing-room, and then you needn't be so

unconscionably late. Ella and I are not such very early birds—that is, as respects going to roost—I do assure you."

"I am very tired to-night," said Ella, coldly, "and shall not sit up."

It was plain to her that her husband's proposition was made to avoid any further opportunity for explanation between them. Her feelings towards him were growing very bitter, and she was no longer solicitous to conceal them.

"I think I will take your advice, Miss Ray," said Cecil, "if you won't think it rude of me to run away; and so I shall wish you ladies good-night, at once." He did not even shake hands with Gracie, since that would have involved some leave-taking of Ella, but simply nodded good-naturedly, and left the room. He had been always wont to light his cigar in his wife's presence, but on this occasion he ordered the servant to bring a light into the hall, for we are never so much on our good behaviour as when we are conscious of behaving very ill.

The front door closed behind him with a gloomy jar, that sounded to Ella's ears like the knell of all the happiness of home.

CHAPTER XII.

"NEITHER TO-NIGHT NOR EVER."

WHAT Cecil had to say to his father that took him away so abruptly from his home, upon that first night of his return, concerns us but little; the matter, however, would seem to have been important, since the upshot was, as he told the two ladies at the breakfast-table the next morning, that Mr. Landon, senior, as head of the firm, insisted upon his return to Wellborough, where affairs required his personal superintendence.

"It is an infernal nuisance," said he; "but when one has once put one's hand 'to the plough of business,' as the governor says, 'there is no looking back'—and very little, he might have added, to which to look forward; for my part, I see no end to the work."

He glanced at both women as he spoke. Ella only replied by a hard smile; but Gracie said:

"But, surely, Mr. Landon, you can give a guess as to how long you are likely to be detained from home?"

"Indeed I cannot," he answered. "We are opening a branch establishment farther south, from which my father expects great things; and I am bound to look after it, until it is set going, as well as to manage matters at Wellborough."

At this moment the letters were brought in. Gracie took hers from the salver; she saw her own lying on it that she had written to Cecil, and which had been forwarded to him. She had half a mind to claim it; but her courage failed her, and the next instant it was in Cecil's hand. She felt that, whatever benefit might have been once secured from it, that it was useless now; that it had, as it were, missed fire; and that the sight of the weapon would only make more angry the man at whom it had been aimed.

He read it, with his other letters, without comment; and presently went off as usual to the office.

"Oh, Ella, I am so sorry that that letter found him here," said Gracie, penitently, as soon as they were alone.

"What does it matter?" returned Ella, bitterly. "Fifty letters would not move him,

wherever they had found him. He came home to quarrel with me, and at last he has succeeded."

There was a world of significance about that "at last." She had restrained herself, as she had never thought it possible for her to do; had shown no "temper;" had been submissive, gentle, pleading; and all to no purpose. He had rejected all her advances towards a reconciliation. She would throw herself at his feet no longer to be thus trodden upon.

"But this is so dreadful, Ella. Perhaps I was wrong to persuade you not to appeal to his father. There is that course still left to you."

"Not now, Gracie," answered she in a hard, stern voice. "He went out last night to have the first word with the old man; to persuade him that what he himself wished to do was the best thing to be done. He will not return home any more."

"Oh, that is impossible, Ella. He has not even taken leave of you. Whatever has misled him and altered him so, he would never do that; it would be so cruel, so unmanly."

"Cruel, of course it is. Unmanly, no, Gracie; men are all cowards when they have once resolved to be base."

"Nay, I am sure that your husband is no coward, Ella."

"He would fight another man, if you mean that," returned Ella, contemptuously; "but he fears the woman he has injured. He dared not once look me in the face. Did you not see it?"

Gracie had noticed that; but she did not say so. She was not one of those women who take a pleasure in widening a breach between their friends and their husbands. On the contrary, she would have given all she had to bridge over this great and terrible gulf, the proportions of which had by this time become apparent to her. She was filled with righteous indignation against Cecil; but she felt it was her duty not to show it, and even to make excuses for him, if excuse should be possible.

"Your husband looks so ill, Ella," she said, presently, "and so unlike himself, that I think there may be some physical reason for his conduct. I really do."

"He seems to me well enough," said Ella.

"I wonder at your saying that. I don't wish to frighten you; but do you not think it possible that that railway accident shook him more than he liked to say? Some men hate to talk of their ailments; and did you not observe how he shrank from any allusion to the collision?"

"I did notice that," said Ella; a ray of hope

breaking in upon the night of her soul. "If there is anything wrong with him—with his brain, I mean—that would, of course, account for his conduct. I should never forgive myself—— But there, such a thing is, to the last degree, improbable."

"Let us hope so, Ella; but it is not improbable that, for other reasons, you may one day say: 'I shall never forgive myself,' as respects your husband. Think as charitably of him as you can, darling; you love him dearly, even yet; and he loves you, though something, which we do not understand, has for the moment come between you."

Ella shook her head, and sighed deeply. "No, Gracie; his love is gone. The void is here"—she laid her hand upon her heart—"a cold and aching void. I am not sure even that I still love him."

"But *I* am sure, Ella; and that you pity him. Even I do that. If ever I saw wretchedness in any face, it was in that of your husband as he left this room."

"He is dissatisfied with himself, as well he may be, no doubt," said Ella. "I did not say he had no conscience."

No one, indeed, with any claims to be an observer of human nature, could have said that,

who had beheld Cecil Landon's face that morning as he set it Citywards. It was, in fact, the very index of a mind, if not remorseful, yet very ill at ease. Gloomy it was, yet not morose; oppressed with the sense of ill-doing; and, perhaps, one would have now added, conscious of more ill to be done. With his hat pressed over his brows, and one hand thrust in his pocket, he walked quickly on for a mile or two after leaving his own house, looking neither to the right nor to the left. Then he consulted his watch and called a cab, giving somewhat elaborate directions to the driver before he entered it.

At the corner of a small street in the City, and at some distance from his own office, he dismissed it, and walked on as before, except that he took some note of the houses on his side of the way. They were all places of business, and most of them occupied by several sets of tenants. At one of these he stopped, and looked down the list of names with some attention. About midway, newly painted in, was that of "C. H. Landon, Commission Agent." He went upstairs and, taking a latch-key from his pocket, opened a door upon the second-floor that bore this name—his own—upon it. The room he entered was a spacious one, newly furnished in office

style; but he cast but one rapid glance around him, as if to make sure that it had no tenant, rather than to note its contents. Then he closed the door, and opened the letter-box that, as usual, depended from it. There was but a single letter, nor, it was evident, did he expect to find a second. It was directed, "Cecil Henry Landon, Esq., Brant Street," in a female hand.

"I told her it was unnecessary to put 'Cecil,'" he muttered peevishly. But there was no peevishness in his face as his eyes fell on the closely-written pages; it was illumined with a glow of expectation that deepened into delight as he read on. The perturbation of his mind had ceased; his trouble, whatever it was, was forgotten, smoothed away by that distant, and, to us, unknown hand. When he had read all, he put the letter to his lips and kissed it.

He looked quite another man from that one who had left his home an hour ago; though not a better man. There was a fire in his eye which spoke of triumph; but it was most assuredly not that most glorious of all victories—the victory which a man gains over himself. It was the exultation rather of one who has yielded to a great temptation, and promises himself a supreme bliss from which he has been hitherto debarred by scruples. This expression, how-

ever, was but momentary; having folded up the letter, and put it carefully away in his breast-pocket, his features reassumed their haggard look. It was like some magic charm, which, while its owner gazes at it, has the virtue of bestowing happiness, but once out of sight, is powerless.

"I will get it to-day," he muttered, "this very day. I cannot endure to go to that house again." He was speaking of his home. "The air seemed poisoned there. And yet who has poisoned it?" Then with a hesitating voice, "Not—not poor Ella." His face grew tender and pitiful; he burst into tears. "What an infernal hypocrite and scoundrel I feel," cried he, with bitterness. "What a cruel and heartless brute. How could I—could I—treat her so! She has never deserved that, whatever she may have deserved."

He had sunk down into the chair beside the office-desk, and there he sat, all huddled together, like a man who has been hanged. Perhaps he deserved hanging; he had at all events suffered something of that mental agony which is said to precede the operation. He had grown to look so old within those five minutes, that he might have passed for his own father. Curiously enough —for he was not a "self-conscious" man, or one

given to self-examination—he was cognisant of his own mental condition. "I feel like a whipped hound," he murmured on; "a creature like Whymper-Hobson is a man compared with me; but there, I have gone through with it. I have broken with her. She must feel that. And she is not one to cling where she has been spurned. It is better so, and I did it for her sake."

He said this in a firm voice, and looked round about him with a defiant air, as though challenging contradiction. Unhappily, Conscience—who alone was present—is like Punch in the puppet-show; it eludes a knock-down blow, and has a most dexterous vitality. It can also be extremely vulgar, and what it whispered in Mr. Landon's ear upon the present occasion was "Liar." Yes, it was "for her sake," just as the surgeon uses the knife to prevent lifelong mischief. It was the actual cautery, in her case, poor soul, without the chloroform. "And this is for her sake too," he went on, looking round the newly-papered, newly-furnished room. "It is to spare her; and keep things quiet as long as may be. The hardest trial is over for both of us; for I suffered too, Heaven knows. There shall be no more such days. I will get it this afternoon, and go down by the evening train. In the meantime I must make all straight with my

father; a difficult matter, I should have thought, at one time; but, compared with what has been surmounted, a very easy task, and, what is better, painless." With a deep sigh he rose and left the room, closing the door behind him, which fastened with a spring lock. As he reached the bottom of the stairs, "C. H. Landon, Commission Agent," again caught his eye. "A pretty commission have I to do to-day," muttered he, bitterly. Then he bent his steps to Wethermill Street. His father, whose habits were punctual and exact as the movements of a machine, arrived a few minutes after him, as the clock was striking ten.

"What, so early, Cecil?" cried he, cheerfully. "You have turned over a new leaf, indeed."

"Well, it was necessary to be early down at Wellborough, father; where a six-hours' work is spread over the whole twelve."

"Ay, I know their ways," said the old citizen, rubbing his hands. "Those country fellows are half asleep till dinner-time, when they wake up with a vengeance."

"After which they take their regular nap," put in Cecil. "Still they are sure, if they are slow. There are no speculations on their private account, with defalcations to follow. There is life and hope in that idea of the branch, I think, though the results may not appear immediately."

"No, begad, they won't do that. However, that is your own affair, my boy, more than mine. When I am a sleeping partner—under the turf—you will reap that crop if there is any. I have taken your word as to the prospects of a harvest."

"I think it will do, father. Indeed, there is a good deal more to be carried off that field—I speak of the West generally—than we have hitherto dreamt of."

"Gleanings, my lad, only gleanings. However, Heaven forbid that I should dash your hopes. I am delighted to see you entertain them, whether you are right or wrong. I never thought to see you take so great an interest in the matter, I confess, and it gratifies me extremely. Why, you'll be the business man of the firm, if you go on like this."

"What I do, I like to do thoroughly," returned Cecil, indifferently. "I only left my work yesterday to come up to consult you——"

"And to see Ella, I suppose," put in the old gentleman, roguishly.

"Well, yes, of course, to see Ella."

"And how does she like the prospect of your running away from her so soon again?"

"I think she has made up her mind to it, sir."

"Then I think she's a deuced good-natured girl, and very easily convinced."

"I don't see that," said Cecil, coldly. "She knows it's for our good, and the good of the firm. And it is not as if she were alone, you know; she has got her friend, Gracie Ray."

"Ay, a very nice-looking young woman; I remember her. I don't think you would find Miss Gracie, if she were Mrs. Cecil Landon, quite so complaisant as Ella. It struck me she was a bit of a Tartar. But as to Ella, I confess I was wrong when I doubted the wisdom of your making her your wife. She is one of a thousand, sir, just fitted to be the wife of a man who has got his hands full of business; not extravagant; nor what is still worse under such circumstances, exacting. You are a devilish lucky dog."

"So people say," said Cecil, who was sitting at his desk, and affected to be looking over some memoranda. "I have been telling her that the sooner I go down Westward, the sooner I shall get my work over. If I went to-day, for example, I could see Critchett about the mill to-night, and set him going."

"To-day! Do you mean to say that Ella will let you go to-day, after six weeks' absence?"

"I think, sir, she is sensible enough to perceive the advantages of such a course."

The old gentleman put up his gold spectacles over his bushy eyebrows, in the rut they had formed for themselves in his forehead, and regarded his son attentively.

"You have had no quarrel with Ella, I hope, Cecil?" said he, earnestly.

"Quarrel! Certainly not, sir. What makes you think that?"

"Nothing. I suppose folks change with the times; but in my day a young wife would not be so easily induced to part with a young husband, just after they had been separated so long; that's all."

"It is the Age of Reason," said Cecil, with a short laugh.

"So I have heard it said," replied the old gentleman, dryly. "Everything moves so fast too, that I daresay you both consider yourselves old married people."

To this Cecil made no reply, but his face grew a shade paler as he bent over his memoranda.

"You have no objection, then, father, to my returning to Wellborough at once?" observed he, presently.

"Not I, if your wife has none. But I do think, in justice to her, Cecil, that you should not remain in the West indefinitely, without sending for her."

"But you see, sir, I have to move about so much just now; it is not as if I were positively established at Wellborough."

"Well, well, you are the best judge of your own affairs. I never interfere in domestic matters. Let me look again at that estimate of Mr. Critchett's."

So that matter was settled, thanks to the preliminary talk which Cecil had had with his father on the previous night. It was not likely that the old gentleman would compare notes with Ella upon the subject, notwithstanding that he had put that word in on her behalf with her husband. He was, as he had said, not one to interfere in domestic matters, nor, indeed, in any matters out of his own line. He knew nothing of the society in which the young couple moved, in London, and did not want to know anything. Social scandal rarely reached his ears, nor had he even so much as heard of that famous immersion of Mr. Whymper-Hobson in Virginia Water. He thought his son's conduct strange, as regarded his leaving Ella for such long intervals; but the fact was only a confirmation of a favourite theory of his own—that all things were changed since his young days. He acquiesced in it, too, the more readily on account of the new-born interest which Cecil

had lately taken in the business, and which was the pretext for his present behaviour. We do not commonly look very keenly into the motives of any action which gives us both pleasure and profit.

There was something else to be done in London that morning by Cecil Landon, besides the business in Wethermill Street, and he did it. Then he returned to the office, and wrote the following note to his wife:

"Dear Ella,—My father and I are both agreed that the sooner I get back to Wellborough, the better, as affairs there are very pressing. I shall therefore go straight down there this afternoon from the City terminus. Be so good as to forward to me, addressed as usual, to the Eagle Hotel, the bag and portmanteau which are in my dressing-room. With kind regards to Gracie, Yours,

"Cecil Landon."

"P.S.—I shall be moving about for some days in the West in connection with our new venture, but shall be at Wellborough probably on Monday."

This letter was, designedly, not posted at once, but reached its destination about five

o'clock, when its writer was already seated in the Great Western express. Ella and Gracie were sitting together when it arrived over their "afternoon tea," a fashion which had just then come into vogue.

Ella read the note, and threw it across to her friend without comment, save what her face said.

"Then he is not coming back to-night, Ella?"

She strove in vain to make her tone indifferent, for she was in fact not only surprised, but shocked.

"No, neither to-night nor ever. Did I not tell you?"

Then she rose and went upstairs, and finding, as she expected, the bag and portmanteau already packed, despatched them to the address indicated. She did one thing more, she locked the dressing-room door and took the key away. It was henceforth a Bluebeard's chamber to her, haunted by memories hardly less terrible than murdered wives.

CHAPTER XIII.

PARTED.

"Gracie, I want you to do me two favours," said Ella, when she returned to the drawing-room.

"You need not ask them, darling; they are granted."

"One is, never to speak to me again—unless I broach the subject—of my husband."

Gracie bowed her head. She had been thinking, while her friend was absent above-stairs, and thinking in vain of what she could say to any good purpose about Cecil.

"My second request, Gracie, is that you will go with me to-night to the theatre."

This surprised Gracie more, and scarcely shocked her less than the first stipulation.

"I will do so, of course, Ella, since I have

promised," said she quietly, for she saw that it was no matter of argument.

"Then we had better dress at once, and dine a little earlier."

During Gracie's simple toilette—for where black is one's only wear there is not much to be done—her sagacity discovered the reason of this strange proposal. Ella wanted some distraction for her importunate thoughts. It was not that the society of her friend was insufficient, but that it reminded her of the very thing that she would fain forget. A less wise and more conventional person would have pleaded her own recent bereavement, and declined to oblige her friend; but Gracie preferred real duty to a sham one. She knew that all such means of drowning sorrow are ineffectual—for there is not depth enough in them to hide its feet—but she also knew this must be proved by experience. He is a poor physician indeed who denies his patient the harmless remedy for which he craves, even though he himself knows it to be futile.

So they went to the play together, and saw something—a burlesque, or a drama, they could scarcely have told which; but there were burglars in it, a circumstance which gave Gracie an opportunity of being of service.

"My dear Ella," said she, as she drove home,

"those men with the black crape over their faces have made me feel quite nervous."

"What men?" inquired Ella; the hand which her friend held in hers was as cold as a stone.

"Those robbers in the play. It is very foolish of me, I know, but would you mind my coming to your room to-night? I feel so frightened at the notion of being alone."

"That is the third favour which I have been thinking of asking of you all to-night," said poor Ella, gratefully. She had felt that the lonely hours would bring with them far worse than such robbers as Gracie spoke of—remorse, regret, despair, remembrance of the happy past, that would rob her bosom of all peace, and leave it bare and cold indeed. It was something that a tender heart would be beating near her, and in loving sympathy with her own.

When they got home, they found an unexpected visitor had come and gone; no other than the Commissary, who, "having business in town," as he told the servant, "had called at seven o'clock, making sure that he should find the ladies in;" the message did not say, "and at dinner," which had been unquestionably the Commissary's object. As this had been defeated by the change in the dinner-hour, he would, he

left word, "do himself the pleasure of looking in on the morrow—about luncheon-time." He might not be the right man in the right place, so far as the performance of his official duties went, but he was one who unquestionably "took an interest in his profession"—the Commissariat.

This news was another pang added to poor Ella's troubles, for she thought it foreshadowed her friend being ordered home.

"Oh, Gracie, supposing he should come to take you away from me; just now, too!"

"You need not fear that," said Gracie, with confidence and a little sigh. She knew her father far too well to imagine that he would wish to carry her off with him from a place where she was living at free quarters, to Letter Z, where her return would be inconvenient as well as expensive to him. He and the Colonel, she felt assured, had by this time turned the whole house into a smoking-room, with the exception of the apartment devoted to mother-of-pearl. At the same time it puzzled her to know what had brought him up to town. He was a man who hated London, chiefly because he was "provincial" (in its worst sense) to the back-bone, and also because London pleasures were not cheap.

Punctually at the hour of the usual midday

meal next day, the Commissary appeared, looking unusually smart, notwithstanding his mourning garb, and in extraordinary good-humour.

"The idea of you two young people keeping house by yourselves," said he; "and doing it so well too!" he added, sniffing at the savoury dishes which Ella had taken care to provide for him.

"It isn't my house, remember, papa," said Gracie, reprovingly.

"It is at her service as long as she chooses to stay in it," put in Ella, quickly. "I hope you are not thinking of cutting short her visit to me, General?"

"No, madam, no," said the Commissary, graciously, and helping himself to a sweetbread. "I feel that my dear girl is in good hands; in excellent hands. Only I think she is in some danger of being spoilt. You are such a lady of fashion, my dear Mrs. Landon. The idea of your going off to the play on the very night that your husband left you, when you ought to have been inconsolable—at home. You see I know all about it; a little bird informed me."

The idea of a little bird—such as a wren or a robin—having had any confidential communication with the Commissary was not a

little incongruous. Ella pictured to herself a vulture whispering a ghastly secret in his ear, as she inquired with indifference:

"But how was it that you really got this information, General?"

"From the best of all authorities—from your husband himself. I met him yesterday afternoon in the strangest place—Well, yes" (to the butler), "I *will* have just one more glass of sherry—at Doctors' Commons. 'Why you were here only twelve months ago,' said I; 'You don't want to be married again, do you, Landon?' It was certainly a most unlikely place to come across a friend, but you never saw a man so taken aback in your life."

"But how came *you* in Doctors' Commons, papa?" put in Gracie, to direct attention from her friend, who had suddenly become strangely excited.

"Oh, I," said the Commissary, his brickbat complexion assuming a glazed look (which was his way of blushing), "I happened to be there on business—to look up a document for a friend."

"My dear Gracie," said Ella, speaking with great effort, "I have just remembered that I have to write by the two o'clock post, so I will leave you to take care of your father for a few

minutes. I daresay you have plenty to say to one another. The drawing-room will be quite at your service."

"Don't mention it," put in the Commissary, hastily, with a sidelong glance at the sherry. "This room will suit us admirably." Then, when Ella had closed the door behind her, and the servant had been dismissed: "I say, what's wrong here, Gracie, my girl?"

"Wrong, papa? There is nothing wrong."

"Why, what makes your friend so queer, and off her feed? She don't—— eh?" He took up his glass and emptied it with a significant gesture. "Some young women do, you know; and really, when they get such tipple as this, there is some little excuse for them."

"Do you mean that Ella——"

"Well, yes, I do; not of course if you think it's a breach of confidence."

"Indeed, I have nothing of the sort to divulge, papa," answered Gracie, with something very like disgust. "I don't think Ella drinks more than I do. She had but one glass to-day, as you could have seen for yourself."

"Nay, she wouldn't drink here, of course; thought she might have gone upstairs to do it. That letter before two o'clock, you know; I don't believe in that, one bit." And

the Commissary winked his eye, and put out his tongue, a duplex action in which, in rare moments of hilarity, and under the influence of sherry far above the ordinary, he sometimes indulged.

"You are utterly and entirely mistaken, papa," said Gracie, gravely. "Ella is not herself just now, being naturally depressed by the unexpected absence of her husband."

"Oh, that's it, is it? A very creditable trait, I'm sure. By jingo, what sherry this is! If you could only make such a match as your friend here has made of it, Gracie, and give your poor father such wine as this when he came to lunch with you, I should come pretty often, I can tell you."

To this glittering inducement to make for herself a prosperous marriage, Gracie said nothing, so let us hope she laid it to heart.

"I can't understand," continued the Commissary, holding up his glass to the light, "why the girl played that trick upon Landon at her marriage. I suppose she had not married before, eh?" and he looked up sharply at his daughter.

"Of course not, papa. What strange ideas you have got in your head about poor Ella. Her reason for marrying under a name that

was not her own I am not at liberty to mention. It was, in my opinion, a very insufficient one; but I do assure you there was nothing absolutely wrong about it; she had nothing to conceal of which, in the sense you have in your mind, she needs to be ashamed."

"Other people don't think so, however, as I happen to know," returned the Commissary, dryly. "Her husband seems to leave her a good deal. He told me yesterday that his return home would be very uncertain."

"Well, that of course makes poor Ella unhappy, and 'off her feed,' as you call it, papa. To remain at home when her husband is away is, of course, very disagreeable for her."

"Just so, if he still keeps away," observed the Commissary, thoughtfully, "and matters grow more unpleasant. What do you think of bringing her down to Woolwich? It will be a change for her; and I tell you what, my girl, it will be a good thing for her reputation."

"Her reputation?"

"Yes, it has suffered not a little; and she cannot do better than show herself among old friends. When it is seen that I offer her the hospitality of my roof"—here the Commissary drew himself up and smote himself on the breast—"her good name will be rea—rea—" his inten-

tion was to say rehabilitated, but this design was too ambitious for his powers—"her good name," he said, "would be resuscitated."

"I don't think she would be moved by any consideration of that kind, papa; but perhaps she might like to come to Woolwich, if you gave her an invitation."

"I will, my girl, I will. You see, if Landon and she were to come to a split, it is most important that you should keep on the old footing with her. She will be always, as I happen to know, independent of her husband; and she will be under great obligations to us for the countenance which we shall have afforded her."

"I don't think Ella stands in need of that, papa," said Gracie, smiling; the contrast between her present residence and Officers' Quarters, Letter Z, as also between the classes of society that frequented them, striking her very forcibly, and tickling her dormant sense of humour.

"By jingo, but you'll find she does," cried the Commissary, emptying the decanter. "Mark my words, that girl's in a hole. I didn't tell her, of course, but I happened to say a word or two to Landon, in a jocular manner, about his ducking Whymper-Hobson in Virginia Water—we know all about that at Woolwich, of course—and he didn't like it at all, I can tell you. If every-

thing had been on the square—I mean as to his marriage—why should he have been so sore about it?"

"I don't know, I'm sure, papa. I don't think he is very good-tempered."

"No—and yet one had need to be in this world. Things happen to put one out enough. The idea of our letting slip fifty thousand pounds, for example—fifty thousand pounds!—just for want of a little early information respecting that young Whymper."

"But how did you let it slip, papa?"

"Why—of course, if we had known that his uncle was going to leave him all that money, I should have made a point of being civil to him. Why, you might have been Mrs. Whymper-Hobson by this time."

In other days, perhaps, Gracie would have returned some answer of dutiful regret, but since she had known Hugh Darall she was no longer ductile as regarded the matrimonial schemes chalked out for her by her astute but unsentimental parent. She had been submissive to her father's will in many things during her mother's lifetime, out of her exceeding love towards her, but now that she was dead—and out of harm's way as respected her lord and master—Gracie's character, though perhaps unconsciously to her-

self, was asserting its independence. Its native bent had been always towards what was right, though the iron pressure of necessity had sometimes warped it. Although this reference to Whymper-Hobson was a mere vain regret upon her father's part, and his scheme a phantom, she would not give encouragement to it by so much as a smile.

"I suppose," continued the Commissary, thoughtfully, "you have not had a chance of meeting this young gentleman; he will probably shun the Landons' society, at all events till he gets dry."

"I have not, of course, gone into society at all of late, papa," returned Gracie, gravely.

"Just so; but you mustn't mope: a girl in your position cannot afford to seclude herself. You may not feel quite up to gaieties at present, but you must make an effort. I do so myself, because I think it is my duty. I have made a point of going out a little—to the Commandant's and elsewhere; and if Ella comes to us we must try to make her stay agreeable to her. We must not mind a little sacrifice, whether it is of our feelings or our pleasures, for other people. Do you think she would mind my smoking a pipe?"

"I think I had better ask her first, papa, as this is the dining-room."

"And if I smoked upstairs," answered the Commissary, peevishly, "you would object 'as this is the drawing-room;' you women are so unreasonable. Look here, I must have my pipe, so I'll take it in the street. Just make my apologies to Mrs. Landon, and say I found my time was running short. You can give her the invitation to Woolwich as from me."

As soon as her father had left, Gracie went upstairs to her friend's room and knocked gently at the door.

"Come in," said a quiet voice.

Ella had been writing no letter—had had, indeed, as the Commissary had suggested, no letter to write—but was sitting on the sofa, with her hands before her, and a hard cold look in her eyes.

"I thought I would come up and see whether I could do anything for you, Ella."

"You can do nothing, Gracie, thank you. Nobody can do anything."

"But what is the matter, darling?"

"Did you hear where your father had met Cecil?"

"Yes; at Doctors' Commons."

"Do you know why he was there?"

"No; how should I?"

"I will tell you; he went to make inquiries as to the legality of our marriage."

"My darling, that is a most morbid, nay, a monstrous fancy. We know there is no doubt about its being legal."

"Still, when one wants to do anything very much—to get rid of one's wife, for instance—one clings to hope."

"Oh, Ella, this is shocking. I am sure your husband never dreamt of anything so wicked. Your nerves are quite unstrung. Papa says he shall be so glad if you would return with me to Woolwich and spend a week or two. I think any change, even to so humble a roof as ours, would do you good."

"To Woolwich?" said Ella, eagerly. "Yes, I should like to go to Woolwich. When is it to be?"

"As soon as ever you please; that is, after our little arrangements have been made for your reception."

"Very good; tell your father I shall be very glad to come. And please excuse me to him; I am not fit to see anyone just now."

Gracie did not think it worth while to mention that her father had left the house, but withdrew at once. She felt that for the time her friend was out of the reach of sympathy, and that the expression of it would do her more harm than good.

"Yes, I will go to Woolwich," muttered Ella, with stern cold face, "because I know he will not like it. He has taken his own way, and I will take mine."

CHAPTER XIV.

SENTIMENT AT LETTER Z.

NOTWITHSTANDING the Commissary's invitation, and Ella's eager acceptance of it, Gracie and she did not go to Woolwich for some time. No day was actually appointed for the visit, and in the meantime Ella "went out" a good deal, taking her friend with her. She had a feverish desire for society, and carried black Care about with her to many a gay scene, which she probably enjoyed even less than Gracie, who had just then but little heart for such. From Lady Elizabeth's particular coterie Mrs. Cecil Landon was excluded, for reasons with which we are acquainted; but the very rumours that were in circulation about her made her all the more popular elsewhere. Among outside circles her story had grown (by the process which is known in our drawing-

rooms as "tradition") into quite the dimensions of a romance. It was said that she had been attached, before her marriage, to Mr. Whymper-Hobson, whose poverty had alone forbidden their union; and that, after his too-late accession of fortune, he had paid her marked attention, and been, in consequence, thrown into the Thames by her husband. Moreover, that that gentleman, unsatisfied by this act of vengeance, was still in dudgeon as respected his wife's conduct, and had as good—or bad—as abandoned her. Under these circumstances we may imagine how great an attraction was this beautiful and forlorn young woman to all fashionable circles. One distinguished personage, a rival of Lady Elizabeth's as a caterer for public pleasure, actually hit upon the plan of inviting Mr. Whymper-Hobson and Mrs. Cecil Landon to her house upon the same evening, "just to see how they would behave." In the same spirit do the barbarian princes of the East introduce in their arenas wild animals that have every reason to shun one another, and take pleasure in their pain. The exhibition was a failure; for just as in the Eastern spectacles the tiger will sometimes turn tail at the sight of some meek horned creature, so did this supposed Don Juan flinch and shrink from Ella's presence, whose splendid "ox eyes" seemed to be unaware of his

existence, as she swept by him as majestic as Juno.

"You behaved most admirably, my dear," said Lady Green, whose active partisanship in Ella's cause was doing her, at least, as much harm as good; "and in a manner that does you infinite credit. Some women in your position, slandered as you have been, and deserted—well, I won't say deserted, but neglected, by her husband—would have made a point of encouraging young Hobson."

"Indeed," said Ella, with superb contempt.

"I don't mean to say that it would have been justifiable," explained her ladyship; "but that it would have been human nature. I am truly glad to see that you are above it, my dear."

But, alas! poor Ella was very human, though her humanity did not exhibit itself in the direction indicated. Mr. Whymper-Hobson was as indifferent to her, and as much beneath her notice, as the pattern of the carpet she trod upon; but that "neglect which was almost desertion" of her husband was wearing away her very heart. It was now three weeks since he had left home for the second time, and not a line had she had from him. That she had not written to him was scarcely to be wondered at. What could she write? What argument could she urge—what

tender plea could she express which she had not used already in vain? Moreover, she was under the great disadvantage of not knowing what was his real attitude towards her. That he was studiously and purposely neglectful of her was now certain; but was he absolutely hostile? If not, would not any strong remonstrance—and in no other style could she have brought herself to write—be likely to drive him to hostility. She did not even know, exactly, where he was. The address, "Eagle Hotel, Wellborough," would find him, doubtless, but by no means it seemed at once. She had learnt that much from his father.

Mr. Landon, senior, had called one day, evidently in utter ignorance of the relations between his daughter-in-law and her husband, and asked her, "What the deuce had become of Cecil?" He had written to him twice, it appeared, upon some pressing matter of business, and received no reply. Then an answer had come from Wellborough, stating that he had been detained "in the South;" but without any explanation of the causes of his detention.

"What does he mean by 'in the South,' confound him?" said the old gentleman, petulantly; "he talks as if he were a ship becalmed in the tropics. Where has he been, and what is he doing with himself?"

"I know nothing about him," was Ella's quiet reply.

"Nothing about him? Nothing about your own husband?"

Then the old gentleman gave a gasp, which ended in a prolonged whistle.

"I will run down to Wellborough myself," said he; "I think it will be better, my dear, than your going." He spoke with an evident effort at indifference, but the very tenderness of his tone had a cruel significance.

"I think it would be much better," returned Ella, coldly.

The old gentleman was a man of action, and started that very day. "I wonder who she is?" was what he kept saying to himself throughout the journey, unconscious that his idea was a plagiarism. The next evening he was back again, and drove from the station straight to his daughter-in-law's. His face was gloomy and stern until he saw her, when it brightened up a little.

"Well, my dear, I am glad to say that matters are not so bad as I almost suspected they might have been. No one at least has robbed you of your husband's affections."

"It is no matter, since they are gone," answered she, bitterly.

"Do not let us say that, Ella. They are temporarily alienated, but that, I sincerely trust, is all. All married people have their quarrels, and there are generally faults on both sides. Of course your marrying him under false pretences—I mean under an assumed name—was a very serious matter."

"That has been forgiven, Mr. Landon. I do not defend it, and I did not to Cecil himself; but he forgave me. He may make use of it now, as an excuse for his cruelty; but he has some other motive for it."

"Well, it isn't what we feared it was, at all events. Cecil has his quarters at the inn at Wellborough—I made inquiries about all that—when he is not down at the branch establishment farther South. It is my impression that he is in the sulks, and that is all. We had some very sharp words between us about his behaviour to you, and I spoke my mind, I promise you. The result is that we have not parted on the best of terms."

"I am sincerely sorry for that, Mr. Landon."

"I am sure you are; but after all it is you who are most to be pitied. I think Cecil is acting very ill, and I told him so. If he is really still troubled about the circumstances of your marriage, as I strove in vain to convince

him, it is his duty to have the ceremony performed again."

"Never!" cried Ella, with glowing face. "That would be an admission which I would never stoop to make. Cecil is right there, however wrong he may be elsewhere. The marriage is perfectly legal, and he knows it."

"I hope so; for, as I told him, if he doubted it, and yet was averse to adopt the remedy, he was a regular Henry the Eighth—a fellow that seeks an excuse to get rid of his wife, just because he is tired of her. Not," added the old gentleman, hastily, "that Cecil can be tired of you; there is no parallel so far, though I pushed it with him still farther. 'Why, one would really think, sir,' said I, 'that there was some Anne Boleyn in the case, for whom you wished to exchange Ella.' That put Cecil's back up at once—so you may be sure he had nothing of the sort in his mind—and we fell out in good earnest. I don't care, however, comparatively speaking, about his cutting up rough with me; we have agreed to differ upon other subjects before this, as you know; but I am ashamed at his behaviour towards you, Ella. 'Don't you imagine,' said I, 'that because you are my son, I shall take your part against your own lawful wife, when I know you are in the wrong.'"

"You are a just man, Mr. Landon, and I thank you," returned Ella, with dignity. "Your son, unhappily, is not just—at least, in this matter—and you have failed, as I expected you to fail."

"Still, it's only a matter of time, my dear," said the old gentleman, soothingly; "it is impossible that he can keep away very long from such a home as this, and such a wife as you; it's not in human nature. He'll be coming back soon, I'll warrant you, quite penitent and tractable, like the prodigal son in the Scriptures."

"He will not find me here after to-morrow, as I am going to stay at Woolwich," said Ella, quietly.

"Indeed! Cecil did not seem to be aware of that."

"Probably not, as I have not told him," answered Ella, quietly. "No communication has passed between us since he left. I am going to stay with Gracie and her father."

"But if he comes home," suggested the old gentleman, "and finds you gone, won't that be a little awkward?"

"If he comes home, he will probably write beforehand, and his letter will be forwarded to me; if not, the 'awkwardness' will be of his own making."

The old gentleman said no more, but looked distressed and troubled. If he had found obstinacy in Cecil, he had found an equal resolution not to yield in Ella; and it augured ill for the result. His tidings, however, had not, in fact, been wholly unwelcome to the neglected wife. It was a secret relief to her to be assured that Cecil's conduct, however caused, was not dictated by an unworthy attachment for another woman. She felt more charitable and less hard towards him, notwithstanding his cruel silence, than she had done for weeks. Perhaps her leaving home conduced to this. If her married life had been but short, it had been, upon the whole, and until the last few months, a happy one. The roof that she was now about to quit —alas! without him—was still a sacred one to her. She had not been able to exile from her heart the memories of vanished joys, and this had been the home of them. There was many a tender tie to be snapped yet, before she could play that independent *rôle* she had mapped out for herself, with ease, or, at least, without the consciousness that she was acting a part.

"We are wiser than we know," says the poet, and he might have added that we are more gentle-hearted also.

It was Gracie's wish to precede her friend, by

at all events a few days, to Woolwich. Officers' Quarters, Letter Z, had never presented a very attractive appearance even in her poor mother's time; and now that they had been so long without female superintendence, they must needs require some looking to before they could be pronounced ready for the reception of any guest, far less such a one as Ella, who was accustomed to have everything so nice about her. Gracie had little pride, and less pretence, in her composition; but she was naturally desirous to make what domestic preparation she could for her friend. On the other hand, Ella besought her so piteously not to leave her even for a day to the companionship of her own thoughts, that she felt compelled to give way to her, and the two young women left town together.

The Commissary himself happened to be engaged on some official duties at the hour of their arrival, so there was no one to welcome them. The first entrance into what had been her mother's home—though, alas! an unhappy one—was a trial for Gracie; she had pictured to herself the empty chair in the bow-window, and the little table on which, while her fingers could still obey her will, the invalid was wont to work. But a still sharper pain than she had apprehended seized her heart when she found that all these

sad relics had disappeared. "Many men, many hearts," is as true a proverb as "Many men, many minds." It is impossible to decide for others on a question of the affections: whether it is better, for example, when one has lost some dear one, that all that belonged to him should be removed and kept out of sight, or whether they should be left, as usual, to in time become common things. The latter is, of course, the easier method, and it might therefore have been concluded that the Commissary would have taken it. His enemies would have said that he could have borne the spectacle of these "trivial fond records" with considerable philosophy, and that it was not likely that he would take much trouble to spare his daughter's sensibilities. But in this case it seemed the good Commissary was wronged. The house had been rearranged throughout, and, it must be confessed, for the better. The mother-of-pearl glories of the drawing-room indeed remained; the "Abbey by Moonlight" on the sofa back, and "Windsor Castle by Night" on the conversation-chair, still gleamed with lurid splendour; but the rest of the rooms had been refurnished, and not without some taste.

"Why, my dear Gracie, this is quite palatial!" said Ella, with a touch of the old sense of fun that had won Cecil's heart almost

as much as her beauty. "Your father has actually gone in for art;" and indeed there was a picture of a ship at sea over the dining-room sideboard, the gorgeous frame of which exacted involuntary homage from every eye.

"Yes," answered Gracie, gravely. "I have no doubt papa has done it for the best; but it seems to me—just at first—that I should have preferred things to be as they were."

Ella felt she had struck a sad note, and was not sorry that at that moment her uncle Gerard made his appearance. It relieved her from embarrassment as respected her friend, and, besides, she wished to have her meeting with the Colonel independent of the Commissary. Gracie guessed that she desired to be alone with him, and almost immediately left the room.

"Well, Ella, I am delighted to see you back at Woolwich, my dear, though I should have preferred receiving you under the old roof; but I have parted with the cottage, as you know, and gone back to barracks. Diogenes is in his tub again."

"I know it, my dear uncle. I hope you are all the happier for not having a self-willed niece to plague you?"

"No, Ella, I can't say that," returned he,

tenderly. "I miss you sadly. But what does it matter; a few more years, and then—why, damme, I shall have wings instead of epaulettes; I shall be an angel!"

Ella could not restrain a smile; she had not seen, or at all events heard, anybody so funny as the Colonel for many a day. Yet perhaps the smile was forced, since he went on: "You look as beautiful as ever, but not so bright and gay. What is it, my dear?"

"Oh, nothing, uncle. I am a sober matron now, remember, and not the thoughtless girl you knew me."

"And more's the pity. I like thoughtless girls; and I am afraid it is only the thoughtless ones that like me."

The Colonel sighed. It was a bad sign with him when he sighed and did not swear.

"When a man has reached my time of life," he continued, "the gout is his only companion; he must expect the blues, Ella. But you—you are still a child in years, and your face should show no care; yet care is there. What's wrong, my girl?"

"There is nothing absolutely wrong, uncle," answered she, with a sudden flush; "nothing, at all events, that can be bettered by our talking about it."

"Does Landon treat you ill, Ella? I never liked him—hang the fellow!"

"Uncle Gerard, for shame!" cried she; "I will not listen to such words. You forget that Cecil is my husband?"

"So I did; I'll hold my tongue. I was only about to reiterate an opinion of mine, that you have heard me express before; so you will lose nothing. Only, if ever you want a friend—if any man should do you a wrong, Ella, husband or not—so help me Heaven I'll put a bullet through him!"

"You would do anything you could to serve me, in your way, I know, uncle."

"Yes, anything in my way, Ella; or, for that matter, out of it, if you'll only show me how. Blood is thicker than water, and, besides," added he, hastily, struck doubtless by the remembrance of how very thin it was in certain cases, "I love you on your own account, niece."

"There have been great changes here," said Ella, pointing to the new furniture and the gorgeous marine picture: the Colonel had found the ladies, as it happened, in the dining-room. "The Commissary seems to have had a fit of extravagance, which surprises me."

"He knows what he's about generally,"

observed the Colonel with significance, "and he thinks he knows always; but we shall see."

"I don't understand you, my dear uncle."

"Why, it's the De Horsingham has done it all, or has caused him to do it. You have heard of the woman, of course?"

"The De Horsingham!" said Ella, looking both surprised and alarmed.

"What! don't you know? Oh! it's all right so far. The lady is a pillow of snow—I mean a pillar. But do you mean to say he has never mentioned her? Why, my dear girl, she has metamorphosed the Commissary. He has become quite a lady's man."

"She is the governess at the Commandant's, is she not?" observed Ella, recalling, for the first time, what Mr. Whymper-Hobson had said of the lady on their way to the picnic. So many events—and such sad ones—had happened in the interim, that she had never given her another thought.

"Yes; but she is said to have some money of her own; to teach only because she likes young people; which a certain friend of ours, not given to credulity in a general way, has chosen to believe. She painted that picture of the ship in a storm herself, and he thinks it's a masterpiece. It's so far like, as I took the liberty

of telling him, that it makes me sick to look at it; but he sticks to his own opinion."

"But do you mean to say, uncle, that this man—the Commissary—is already thinking of marrying again?"

"I should say he thought of nothing else," answered the Colonel, coolly. "She is a fine woman, there is no doubt of that; and if she really has got money it is natural that he should be anxious not to let her slip through his fingers. I know what you would say, 'the funeral baked meats,' and so forth; indeed, I ventured upon that quotation myself, but he replied that Hamlet's mother only showed a wise economy. The Commissary's independence of public opinion is, I have always maintained, a fine trait in his character; it rises to sublimity."

"I think *he* ought to rise to sublimity—with a rope round his neck," said Ella, with indignation.

"My friend, and your host—and be hanged to him, eh?" said the Colonel, comically. "That is the female view of the case, no doubt; nine-tenths of the ladies here are agreed with you. On the other hand, if it is a compliment to a wife, as it undoubtedly is, that her husband should marry again after her death, the sooner he does it the greater compliment he confers.

The poor Commissary as a widower is inconsolable; as a husband he hopes to be once more a happy man. What does it matter to anybody but himself and the De Horsingham?"

"I think it would matter a great deal to Gracie. It would be simply an outrage upon her mother's memory if her father married within the year."

"A year and a day, my dear Ella. If we are to be so very particular, let's have the thing correct. Now you astonish me—a clever sensible woman, and married too—in taking this conventional line. It is nothing to me, you know. If I have a wish in the matter, it is that my friend should not make a fool of himself, because the De Horsingham will, I know, object to my smoking in this room. But if I was he I should please myself."

"I am thankful to say you are not he, nor anything like him. But, surely, Gracie knows nothing of this?"

"I can't say, but I should think not. You see her absence from home has been some sort of excuse to the poor Commissary for going into society, and in fact for cultivating relations with the lady in question. And as you induced her to leave her home, you have yourself a share of the blame. Under the circumstances I think

you should at least not interfere. Gracie is old enough to fight her own battles, should fighting be necessary. I really think a certain reticence is imposed upon you, at all events until you see the way the cat jumps—I mean how the De Horsingham behaves herself."

"Of course, I shall say nothing to Gracie, unless she speaks to me upon the matter."

"A very right conclusion, and arrived at in the very nick of time, dear Ella, for I see the gallant Commissary coming through the square."

CHAPTER XV.

THE COMMISSARY GROWS CONFIDENTIAL.

THE Colonel's remark had a certain "lilt" with it, and as Ella looked through the window and saw "the gallant Commissary coming through the square," she could not but acknowledge there was a romantic air about him, that suggested melody; it was not the poetry of motion, for his walk was strictly, not to say stiffly, military; but his bearing was triumphant, his colour high—even to his cheek-bones—and he swung his cane in quite a light and airy manner. In his button-hole was a bouquet, as large as ladies are wont to carry, and on his enormous hands were stretched a pair of lavender gloves. It was unusual to see the Commissary out of uniform; he avoided mufti "upon principle," he said, and because "in his time officers were not ashamed of their profession," though his enemies affirmed that motives

of economy, and a well-grounded apprehension of being taken for a colour-sergeant out on a holiday, had something to do with it; but to behold him thus attired was a portent.

"Does he not look every inch like an expectant bridegroom?" observed the Colonel, grinning.

"He looks more dreadful than ever, I think," said Ella, with a little shiver.

Then her host came in, and welcomed her to his "humble roof" with what was for him "effusion;" and Gracie came down, and was embraced with every demonstration of paternal affection. The Colonel, from motives of delicacy, and also because he was upon the brink of a burst of laughter, stood apart at the window whistling softly to himself, "Froggy would a-wooing go."

"I hope you found what has been done in your old home a pleasant surprise, Gracie?" said her father.

"Everything looks very nice and pretty, papa; and it was very thoughtful and kind of you to put those charming flowers in our rooms."

"Eh, flowers? what flowers? Oh, I daresay that was Rosanna's doings—I mean Miss de Horsingham's. That lady has been most kind, my dear. I consulted her in your absence about

the little arrangements in preparation for your return, and for the reception of our honoured guest here, Mrs. Landon; and I think she has acquitted herself to admiration."

"Everything is very nice, I am sure," said Ella, seeing that her friend was at a loss for words. "I am very sorry, however, to have been the cause of having kept Gracie from home so long, and from executing her own proper functions as the mistress of your house."

"Oh, don't mention it," returned the Commissary, coolly; "Miss de Horsingham has a great taste for embellishment."

"I hope that does not extend to her conversation," said Ella, quietly.

The Colonel, at the window, exploded into a roar.

"There's a boy's hat just fallen in the mud," he said, in explanation, as the Commissary drew himself up with an offended air.

"Miss de Horsingham is the soul of truth, Mrs. Landon," observed her host.

"Then I should very much like to see her," returned Ella, blandly.

"Your wish shall be gratified to-morrow. Gracie shall ask her to dinner."

"But, papa, it is so soon," faltered Gracie. She knew Miss de Horsingham, and rather liked

her; but she had been by no means an intimate friend of the family; indeed they had had none such but Ella. At the same time, if this lady had been kind to her father, she felt it was her duty to acknowledge it; and as to his having any matrimonial views, they never entered into her head; mainly, perhaps, because she concluded that Miss de Horsingham must needs be without dowry.

"Your objection would hold good, with respect to any stranger," said the Commissary, loftily. "Indeed, Gracie, I think you might give me credit for understanding that much. But Miss de Horsingham has shown an interest in me and mine which merits a peculiar acknowledgment. The Colonel here is, of course, too, in an exceptional position. He will make one, I hope, of our little party."

"I'll come, like a shot," said the Colonel, cheerily.

"But that does not prevent Ella's uncle from dining here to-day also, papa," said Gracie. The Commissary was not, generally, lavish of his hospitality, and it was a stroke of policy for straightforward Gracie quite Machiavelian, which thus reminded her father of the relationship between the Colonel and their guest.

"Of course not; of course he'll dine to-day

—if he'll take us in the rough, and trust to pot-luck."

This observation must have been dictated by something of the pride that apes humility; for, in fact, very extraordinary preparations had been made on Ella's behalf; and the *avant-courier* of them had already stolen into the room from the kitchen.

"I have an old campaigner's nose, Commissary," said the Colonel, alluding to this grateful odour, "and I will risk the pot-luck."

The dinner, in fact, was as great a success as circumstances permitted it to be; the two gentlemen were in high good-humour; and Ella, as usual, endeavoured to forget her own sad thoughts in lively conversation with her uncle. Gracie could not banish from her mind that memory which seemed to have died out so soon from her father's, and his mirth jarred upon her ears. She knew that her mother had expected to be forgotten by him; that she had felt her own death not only as the laying down of a heavy burthen, but as releasing others from their share of it; yet the thought: "Does she see, does she hear, is she sensible of this too swift erasure of the past?" would intrude on her. Nevertheless, she did her best to play the hostess.

"Now, I call this very nice and comfortable," said the Commissary, when the ladies had withdrawn, and the whisky and hot water made their appearance. "Here's to your niece's health, Colonel!"

"You are very good," said the Colonel, a little stiffly. He did not dislike the other's companionship with himself, but he resented the idea of any familiarity upon his part with Ella. He had said no more than the truth when he had expressed his wish that she had come to his own roof, rather than to that of the Commissary; and he thought it rather a liberty in him to have invited her.

"We will have a good bout of it this evening," observed his host, "since to-morrow we shall be rather on our p's and q's, I suppose."

"Why?" inquired the Colonel.

"Well, Miss de Horsingham will be here, you know."

"I don't see why we should be more on our p's and q's, as you call it, because of the Commandant's governess, than now, with my niece and your daughter in the house."

"I only meant that she would be more of a stranger," said the Commissary, hastily.

"Well, I suppose that won't be the case very long, will it?" observed the other.

He spoke indifferently, almost contemptuously, and looked up so impudently at his companion, that some men, having a glass of steaming grog in their hand, might have been induced to throw the contents in his face. But the Commissary, who was drinking, merely winked significantly over the top of his tumbler, and when he had set it down, replied:

"You have hit it, Colonel."

"It was impossible to miss it," returned the other. "One can't miss a barn-door flying. I am not speaking of the lady of course"—for the Commissary's face had suddenly turned to that yellow-red which, in his signal-book, betokened fury—"but of your intentions regarding her. They are honourable, I have no doubt, but they are deuced open."

"I mean them to be so."

"Wanted to compromise the lady, eh? Quite right," said the Colonel, stirring his glass, and looking at his boots.

The glance that his companion bestowed on him was a concentration of malignity and passion; but it was unseen, or, at all events, unheeded. He went on in a philosophic tone:

"All is fair in love and war, they say, and to secure a woman there is nothing like the plan you have adopted; but it has this disadvantage,

that it cuts both ways. You are as much bound to her as she is to you, and though there is no brother in the case, the Commandant himself would think it his duty, remember, to see the lady righted."

"Of course he would, should there be occasion; but I have quite made up my mind upon the matter."

"You really mean to marry this woman, then?"

"I really mean to marry this lady," said the Commissary, with a significant stress.

"Well, you know your own business best, no doubt; but I should have thought that a man like you—a warm man, a man with a good bit of savings, I suppose——"

The Commissary shook his head; but smiled, nevertheless. It was a very gentle denial of the impeachment.

"I say, I should have thought, Ray, that you would have chosen a younger woman—'a companion for your dear girl,' as widowers with a grown-up daughter always say to justify their choice of a chicken."

"I should not have thought myself justified, as regards Gracie, in making choice of any young woman," said the Commissary, loftily, "unless she had an independence of her own."

"Which Miss de Horsingham has not, I conclude?"

"I never asked her any such question."

"Nor ever made any inquiries, I suppose?"

The Commissary smiled, not so much, it seemed, in answer to the Colonel's roguish look, as at something that was passing in his own mind.

"Come, tell me the truth, General."

The "General," coming as it did unexpectedly, and at the end of so many observations by no means of the conciliatory sort, was too much for even the Commissary's reticence. His smile expanded to a grin, and his large face glowed with conscious pride.

"Well, I know I can trust you, Colonel."

"I will be close as wax."

"And you won't—you won't take advantage of what I am about to confide in you by endeavouring to cut me out?"

"To cut you out? Gracious heavens! with the De Horsingham? Certainly not."

"Very good; that lady has ten thousand pounds, sir, in her own right."

"I don't believe it," said the Colonel, bluntly. "It's no good your being put out; this is really one of those statements which a man ought to preface with: 'I would not have believed it if I

had not seen it myself'—and so give his friend a loophole."

"Well, I have seen it myself," said the Commissary.

"What, the money? The ten thousand pounds? Does she carry it about with her in notes? And if she does, are you sure they are not flash notes? Have you looked at the water-mark?"

The Commissary held up his finger for silence, looked cautiously at the door, and then whispered in his companion's ear:

"I have been to Doctors' Commons and read her father's will: 'I give and bequeath to my only daughter Rosanna, the sum of ten thousand pounds.'"

"Perhaps she has spent it since," suggested the Colonel.

It was a random shot, fired after the engagement was well-nigh over, for the speaker felt that he was beaten; but it went home.

The Commissary turned a dreadful colour—his own particular, with something added—as though he were crossing the Channel on a rough day.

"How on earth should she spend it?" faltered he, with sickening apprehension.

"I don't know, because I don't know her

tastes," said the Colonel. "But some women's are devilish expensive."

"She is economy itself," said the Commissary.

"Ah, that's a bad sign; one never knows the value of money till one has lost it."

"I don't think she'd dare," muttered the Commissary through his shut teeth, and looking very unlike a bridegroom. "She has never boasted of her money, it is true, but she has led me to conclude—I mean before I found it out for myself—that she has got something."

"Like somebody else," said the Colonel, "eh? You will be a pair of cunning ones, you two."

To this disparaging observation the Commissary answered nothing. His companion's chance suggestion had fallen on very fruitful soil, prepared for its reception by base suspicions of all human kind. He wiped his damp forehead with a huge red bandana, and laid his bony hand upon his companion's arm.

"Look here, Juxon, we have been old friends for many a year, and know all about one another—or nearly so. You must give me a helping hand—I am not the rich man you suppose me to be. I don't want your money," he added, hastily—for the Colonel had drawn himself up a little, and was mechanically buttoning up his pockets—"but only your advice. You have a deuced long

head of your own, and you understand womankind. It is necessary for me—absolutely necessary—that I should marry money. Now, if Miss de Horsingham hasn't got it"—the Commissary looked so miserably embarrassed, and at a loss for words, that his friend took pity on him, and finished the sentence: "You would let her remain Miss de Horsingham, in short, to the end of the chapter."

"I would see her—in York," said the Commissary, mentioning, however, a much more southerly spot. "It is necessary to be quite sure, my good friend, and I want your advice, as to how to make sure."

"Ask her," said the Colonel, bluntly. "You need not say anything about the money that has been left her, since you have made certain of that; but let the conversation turn upon extravagance, and then put the question point-blank. 'Dearest Rosanna, I am afraid with your generous instincts, and your scorn of petty details, that you are one neither to look after the pence, nor take care of the pounds.' Then she will say, 'Yes, she is, because she has had a lesson;' or she will say, 'No, she isn't;' and then you will know that the money—or some of it—is gone. I don't think a woman would evade a home-thrust like that. It would afford her such a capital

opportunity of confessing to a little extravagance, if she has really committed a great one, and of course you must not let her suspect, that, if she has, you are off your bargain."

"I'll just write that down," said the Commissary, producing his note-book; "I mean the question I am to put to her about her 'generous instincts.' Nothing like having a proper understanding about these matters. 'I have ten thousand pounds, you may take me or leave me,' is what I should like her to say; but there's no getting a woman to be business-like. However, to-morrow evening, I will try and bring her to book."

I am afraid the Colonel was not altogether sorry for having given his friend so much disquiet. He was annoyed with him with respect to Ella, partly on her account, and partly on his own; he considered her in every way the Commissary's superior, but especially so in a social point of view, as being his (the Colonel's) niece; and he was proportionately sensitive, after the manner of his kind, about his own female belongings, as he was callous with respect to those of other men. He had the sagacity to make a good guess as to why the Commissary had invited Ella to Woolwich; namely, that she might throw the *ægis* of her own "position" over Miss de

Horsingham; though as for there being any reciprocity in the matter, such as his friend had hinted to Gracie, it had never entered into his mind. On the contrary, although he was by no means ignorant that Ella's reputation had suffered in local circles from the stories afloat concerning the deception used at her marriage, the Commissary's roof was, in his opinion, by no means one adapted for the relacquering process. If she had been invited to the Commandant's, instead of to patronise the Commandant's governess, and perhaps to be mixed up in some future scandal concerning her, that would have been quite another matter; but as it was, Ella's coming to Woolwich—especially, too, without her husband—was a mistake, and he was by no means pleased with the man who had counselled it. The Colonel, notwithstanding that he resented the contempt of others for the Commissary, did in fact himself secretly despise him; their companionship was, upon his side, one of convenience only; and when this is the case, a quarrel is very easily picked with the inferior party. It was well, therefore, for the host, albeit unconscious of his danger, that he now moved an adjournment to the ladies, whom they found deep in a confidential talk, on the sofa with a background of mother-of-pearl.

CHAPTER XVI.

A NICE LITTLE DINNER-PARTY.

"I THINK, Gracie, you should call on Miss de Horsingham before she comes to dinner to-night," said the Commissary, on the morning after his daughter's return. Gracie was making the tea for breakfast, to which her friend had not yet come down; she paused in her occupation, and looked up with a surprised air.

"Why, papa? It is not as if she were a stranger to me; and surely it is scarcely fitting that I should go about just now making calls."

"Not in a general way, of course," returned he, sharply; "I thought I explained to you last night that this lady has earned the right to be considered an exceptional case."

"But the Commandant's family have not earned it, papa; and if I go to the house, I must needs seem to be calling on them also."

"Stuff and nonsense; I have no patience with such conventionalities. This is a matter of which I should think you might trust your father to be the best judge. I am sure Miss de Horsingham would not wish it, unless it were the correct thing, and so forth; and I happen to know she does wish it. I know of no better authority on all questions of propriety and—— Ah, Mrs. Landon, how are you?—though, having seen you, I scarcely need ask. Woolwich is, as it were, your native air; and I am delighted to see it agrees with you."

"I am quite well, thank you. How are you, Gracie?—what is the matter?" for Gracie was looking deadly pale.

"Nothing, dear Ella; my father and I were having a little discussion about my calling on Miss de Horsingham to-day, and since, as he says, it is a question of propriety, I should be glad of your opinion. Do you think it necessary that I should do so?"

"One moment," interrupted the Commissary; "I did not say 'necessary,' Mrs. Landon; but merely as an act of civility—of acknowledgment of kindness to her father under certain exceptional and distressing circumstances—I ventured to recommend it."

"I should not go, if I were Gracie," said

Ella, quietly. "The lady is much her senior, as I understand, and can scarcely require what must be taken more or less as an act of chaperonship. If Gracie were about to return thanks in person for kind inquiries, not to her in particular, but to other friends, Miss de Horsingham might be included: but otherwise I think at present Gracie should not make calls."

"Very good," said the Commissary, indifferently. "It is, after all, a woman's question, and I bow to your opinion, Mrs. Landon."

He looked so black that Ella could not help remarking—though she was sorry for it the next moment:

"I should not have expressed any opinion, Mr. Ray, had I not been asked to do so."

"I am sure you would not," said he; "but since Gracie thought proper to appeal to you, you were, of course, obliged to answer." He cast an angry glance in the direction of his daughter, and sat down to breakfast. He perceived that there were disadvantages, as well as advantages, in the presence of Mrs. Cecil Landon beneath his roof. If she had not been there—though in this he was in error—he felt sure that Gracie would have given in to his wishes at once; the consciousness of the neighbourhood of an ally, he thought, had made her

audacious; whereas, as we have said, she was not so pliant—being under no such compulsion to be so—as of yore. Indeed, on any question involving respect for her mother's memory, she was more than resolute—she was unflinching.

So Miss de Horsingham came to dinner without the preparatory call; and, it must be confessed, without any appearance of having lacked that attention to place her perfectly at her ease. The Commissary, in speaking of her to the Colonel, in confidence, had poetically compared her to Juno. She was certainly a tall, fine woman, with large eyes and a majestic step; but, to less prejudiced observers, she might not have seemed of the first Olympian quality. They would have set her down as a Juno, who had been Jupiter's housekeeper—in a perfectly decorous way, of course—or had let lodgings to the lesser gods. Her raven hair hung in two flat festoons upon her broad white forehead, which gave it an artificial appearance that it did not deserve; and she wore upon her stately person such a profusion of jewellery as is not often seen, except upon young ladies in cigar-shops. There was this important difference, however, that Miss de Horsingham's ornaments were what they pro-

fessed to be—gold and precious stones—as the Commissary had assured himself, by every means short of actual assay. No one that was not at all events in easy circumstances, he argued, could afford to wear that amount of precious metal; it was like letting two hundred pounds, at least, lie idle, and equivalent to a loss of ten pounds per annum. She had a sweet and rather sad smile, which was somehow unexpected in one of her robust appearance, and therefore the more pleasing, and her voice was soft and low, though very distinct. Gracie received her with some warmth of welcome, for she liked her rather than otherwise, and was willing to please her father in all things permissible. Her guest returned her kiss with tenderness, but without effusion.

"I should not have come so soon, Gracie," she whispered, "at least, not like this"—she meant on any such festive occasion—"but for your father's wish."

"I understand," returned Gracie, gratefully; though she was, in truth, very far from doing so, except that she saw Miss de Horsingham meant to be very considerate. Her success with Ella was not great.

"I have heard so much of you, and am so pleased at last to see you, Mrs. Landon."

"You are very kind to say so," said Ella. "I have been always so unfortunate in not seeing you when we dined at the Commandant's."

This was a sharp flick of the tongue, for Ella very well knew that the reason she had not seen her was that the governess did not dine with the family when there was a dinner-party. It was quite contrary to her custom to be so cruel, especially considering the subordinate position of the other lady; but she was angry with her upon her friend's account (who was still quite unconscious of her designs upon her father), and resented, on her own part, Miss de Horsingham's air of patronage.

Nevertheless, the two ladies smiled upon each other quite prettily, and it was in Miss de Horsingham's most dulcet tones that she inquired after Cecil.

"I have heard so much of him, too; I hope it is not ill-health which prevents him from being here to-night—but that is impossible; I forgot that in that case you would not have left him."

"He is quite well, thank you," returned Ella, calmly; but she felt that the "flick" had been returned with interest, and winced under it.

Then Miss de Horsingham exchanged a few

words with the Colonel, whose courtesy never failed him with a "fine woman" (unless when speaking of her to others), and was conducted to the sofa by her host. Her magnificent proportions occupied the whole of it, and shut out the glories of the "Abbey by Night," that blazed upon its back, from all beholders.

"It was so good of you to come," whispered the Commissary.

"Nay, General, it was so good of you to ask me. How beautiful Gracie is looking! Even the charms of Mrs. Landon cannot throw her into the shade."

"They are both very well in their way," answered the host, indifferently.

He would have liked to have added something about somebody else's style of beauty being more in *his* way, but he felt a difficulty in expressing it neatly; and, besides, he still felt too uneasy about the present existence of those ten thousand pounds to commit himself to such an extent.

Of course there are some circumstances under which stout gentlemen and ladies find themselves at a disadvantage in society—in a stall at the opera; or on a plank between the quay and a steamboat; or in a shell-jacket; but taking them all round, they are certainly in a

position of superiority. Their appearance gives them a certain *aplomb*: if their conversation is grave, a moral weight is somehow imparted to it by their physical proportions; if lively, it adds piquancy to the jest. I doubt if Falstaff would have been so great a wit if he had been a lesser man. If fat folks are stupid, allowance is made for them; if otherwise, they overwhelm opposition.

Miss de Horsingham was by no means stupid, and she carried all before her on the evening in question, and apparently without effort. She did not put herself forward in any way, and made herself agreeable to everybody, including Ella. She was apparently content at having shown her teeth to her at their first encounter, and was amiable without an attempt at conciliation; nor did she irritate her by evincing the least sign of encouragement to the Commissary. His attentions were, to Ella's eyes at least, unmistakable; but Miss de Horsingham either affected not to see them, or accepted them in such a manner as robbed them of much of their significance. She spoke quite naturally of her own way of life, using indeed that favourite phrase of hers with respect to her pupils, that she "loved to see their minds xpand like the flowers to the sun;" but she

had employed the metaphor so often that it had become at last second nature with her to use it.

"And yet you will some day get tired of teaching," observed the Commissary.

She shrugged her shoulders very slightly, yet sufficient to show what very fine shoulders they were, and answered quietly:

"Perhaps I may. Then, I suppose, I shall give it up."

"Gad, it isn't everybody who can give up what they get tired of," observed the Colonel. He did not say it with any intention of assisting the Commissary—the rogue was thinking indeed of the married state, of poor devils with wives—but nothing could have been more grateful to his host, who would have made the same remark himself, had he possessed the courage. He awaited Miss de Horsingham's reply with eager ears.

"I cannot imagine anyone, of principle," said she, coolly, "pursuing a calling for which they felt themselves no longer fitted."

The answer was not very satisfactory, it being another sort of principle which the Commissary was anxious to hear about, and he could not resist the opportunity of pursuing the investigation.

"Unhappily," said he, in a low voice, "the

vulgar question of pounds, shillings, and pence, Miss de Horsingham, keeps most of us to our posts, whether we will or no."

"It may do so in a man's case," said she, "but women are in a better position. If we are not ambitious, and know how to live on a little, we can afford some sacrifice to maintain our self-respect."

"I should not have thought your own tastes were very economical," continued the Commissary, with a glance of his hawk's eye that took in earrings, brooch, and bracelets at one swoop.

"Ah, you are thinking of my jewels. They were my dear father's gifts, who could deny me nothing; but as for myself, I think I may say I have never spent a shilling in my life in mere extravagance."

"Pray take some more champagne," said the Commissary, with effusion. "It is really very good."

"I have no doubt it is," said she, smiling; "but champagne—to me, at least—is an extravagance, and therefore a thing to which I have not been used."

"She is perfectly charming," thought the Commissary, "and yet," suggested his practical intelligence, "she may have frittered away the money in speculations after all; women are so

foolish in their frugalities." How could he make himself sure that it was not so in the present instance? He remembered the Colonel's formula about "generous instincts;" but that would only serve him as respected her habits of economy, of which he now felt assured. He had no formula for the inquiry whether she had invested her money in bad securities.

All this was the more unfortunate, since the Colonel and the other two ladies were engaged in some topic of interest, and the ear of Miss de Horsingham was all his own. The Commissary's intelligence did not, however, fail him at this pinch. A most ingenious thought occurred to him. He would propose to her that they should play a round game after dinner, and would ask if she liked "speculation." Whether she replied "Yes" or "No," or even that she knew nothing about it, the opportunity would be given him of speaking of the risks of investments. Like all the suggestions of real genius, nothing could be more simple, or go more directly to the point. It was one of those things the success of which appears assured until we try it, when some unforeseen misadventure wrecks the whole scheme.

"Are you fond of cards, Miss de Horsingham?"

"No; they don't interest me in the least——

What is that you are saying, Colonel, about Mr. Darall?"

The bird had escaped from the snare of the fowler and flown in his very face. The lady had turned from him abruptly, and, if it had been possible, like a listener bored, to ask a question, which she knew to be offensive to him, of another. For Miss de Horsingham was certainly not unaware that young Darall had paid some attentions to Gracie, against which he (her father) had put his veto; it was known throughout the garrison, and Miss de Horsingham was not the sort of person who would be the last to hear such a piece of gossip. The Commissary bit his lip, and in his nervous vexation spilt his champagne over his trousers. Fortunately, among his recent acts of extravagance he had substituted a pair of superfine black ones for the "ducks" that had hitherto been his evening wear; but still it was very annoying. His attention was necessarily directed to the conversation too, which he did not wish to escape him, though its topic was so unwelcome. He perceived, indeed, that Gracie did not join it, but she kept her eyes fixed before her, and was evidently bestowing on it her best attention. The others were giving tongue fast enough (confound them!) and all together, like a pack of hounds in full cry.

"I am glad he has got it," said the Colonel, "for I think he deserves it."

"Who is that who has got his deserts?" inquired the Commissary, with irritation; "has anybody been hung?"

"Not exactly," replied the Colonel, grinning. "He has only been suspended from his military duties. We are talking of young Darall, who is to be sent on survey, it seems, to the South of England."

"He is surely very young in the Service to get such a good appointment?" observed Ella, with interest.

"It does not require much intelligence for such a post, my dear madam," remarked the Commissary. "His stock-in-trade will be a theodolite and a chain—with which he will probably hang himself in the South of England——"

"Not a bit of it," interrupted the Colonel; "he is going to Pullham, or thereaboats; very excellent quarters as it happens, with plenty of society."

"Pullham—I've heard of Pullham," said Ella, reflectively.

"It is where the accident occurred upon the railway," said Gracie, softly, and speaking for the first time.

"To be sure," sighed Ella, "I had forgotten."

She remembered it all now, and all that had happened since; the moments were rare indeed when it was out of her thoughts. Her interest in the conversation vanished from that moment, and the Colonel and Miss de Horsingham pursued it alone.

"I believe Sir Hercules got it for the lad," continued he; "he had always a very high opinion of him."

"That is true," observed Miss de Horsingham. "I heard him one day—at luncheon—speaking of Mr. Darall to the Commandant, and he said that he had never known good conduct and hard work combined so happily in any young man."

"I should think he was plodding," put in the Commissary with a sneer.

"That is the pace that tells," replied Miss de Horsingham. "I think I may say that much from my own experience in education."

"Gad, and it is the pace that kills, madam," observed the Colonel, with the air of a man whose natural genius had been too great for his advancement in life.

"I am wholly of your opinion, Colonel Juxon," said the lady, and with a sweet smile of acknowledgment, in reply to her young hostess' signal for retiring, she sailed majestically from the room.

"Well, Commissary, did you bring her to book?" inquired the Colonel, as soon as they were alone together. "I saw you whispering soft nothings to your 'Juno' all dinner-time; was there anything wrapped up in them?" The Colonel's air was gay, and his manner good-natured; to do him justice, champagne had always a conciliatory as well as an elevating effect upon him, which is not universally the case with gentlemen who have "tempers."

"Why, no," replied the Commissary, sulkily. "I was getting on well enough with her, till you began to talk of that young scoundrel Darall, and that distracted her attention. There's one thing, however. If she was not independent—if it was of material advantage to her that she should marry yours truly, she would not have ventured to take that line—I mean of cracking up the man, when she knows I hate him like poison."

"A very intelligent observation, Commissary; and there's also another thing, which you seem to have overlooked, but which to my mind augurs better for you than anything—shows, in fact, that she has made up her mind to catch you."

"What's that?" inquired the Commissary, nervously. He didn't quite like the notion of being "caught."

"Well, this very praise she indulged in of young Darall. She wants to recommend him to your daughter, don't you see?"

"I see that, of course; and I don't like it," added the Commissary, with irritation.

"Then you must be a bigger fool than I took you for. Is it possible that you don't perceive her object? She doesn't care a farthing for Darall, but she wants to get Gracie off your hands. A widower with a pretty daughter is not half so pleasant a party in her eyes"—it is probable the Colonel meant *parti*—"as a widower without encumbrance. Don't you see?"

"There is something in that," observed the Commissary. "I have no doubt, however, that the prospect of becoming Mrs. Ray was agreeable to her."

"Ah, you have your misgivings, have you," said the Colonel, irritated perhaps with his companion's complacency, "as to which will be the better horse when you come to run together in double harness?"

"Not I," returned the other, with a laugh that had some smack of brutality in its contemptuous ring; "for my part I can't understand a man knocking under to his wife. I'll venture to say that there's not a shrew in England whom, were I her husband, I wouldn't tame in twelve—

well, within twenty-four hours—after she first showed her teeth."

He brought his great hand down upon the table to give emphasis to his words, and the action, coupled with the menacing expression of his face, was very significant.

"You wouldn't larrup her, would you?" inquired the Colonel, with the air of a member of a social science committee asking for practical information.

"Begad, but I would though," answered the Commissary roughly; "that is, of course," added he in a gentler tone, "if all other means should fail."

"You may swear at them—I mean at a shrew—for forty minutes without anything coming of it, if you mean that by 'other means,'" returned the Colonel in that tone of profound conviction which is produced by experience alone.

"I don't know about that," answered the Commissary; "but I think I should be equal to the occasion, whatever remedy seemed requisite."

"You do, do you? You think yourself a Rarey for breaking in wives? I don't approve of the practice, mind. I think the fellow is right who wrote, 'The man who lays his hand upon a woman, save in the way of kindness, it is rank flattery to call'—— You know the lines?"

"No," returned the Commissary, sulkily; "and I don't want to know them. What are you driving at?"

"Well, you know Rarey gave public exhibitions, which is too much to be expected in your case; but if, when your experiment is about to come off with the second Mrs. Ray, *née* De Horsingham, you will do me the favour to send for me, I'll give a ten-pound note to see it."

"You have some doubt of the result, eh?" said the other, carelessly. "You were always afraid of the women, Colonel."

"You mistake me, sir," observed the other with energy, as he rose to join the ladies; "I have not the least doubt of the result. The result will be, if you do proceed to such an extremity, that you will get the soundest hiding from Mrs. R. No. 2 that you ever got in your life."

At this the Commissary only laughed contemptuously, and thought no more of the matter; but the Colonel, like some too professional sibyl of old, could not get his own prophecy out of his head. People often express their wish to know what other people are thinking about; and very much astonished they

would often be if their desire were gratified. But if the idea that was filling the Colonel's mind for the next hour or so could have been imparted to the rest of the company—and especially to the guest of the evening—it is probable that they would never have entertained so imprudent a wish again. He watched the majestic movements of Miss de Horsingham as an artist his model, or a surgeon the subject of his lecture. "By jingo, what an arm!" "By gad, what a biceps!" were his muttered expressions of admiration. It was evident to everybody, including herself, that Miss de Horsingham was making a very great impression upon the Colonel. It filled the Commissary with a pardonable pride, and also with the fixed resolve that he would see the lady home himself, and not trust her to his friend's escort. The Colonel was a man of honour, but he knew that the lady had ten thousand pounds, and everybody has his price. To do him justice, however, the latter went away without attempting any *coup* of this description, and the host took leave of him at the door in high good-humour.

"She is a fine woman, Colonel, is she not?" said he, confidentially.

"By gad, she is, sir; a very fine woman!" When the door was closed upon him the Colonel added these remarkable words—"as you'll find out. She'll give him the soundest hiding—will Mrs. R. No. 2—he ever got in his life; and serve him right."

In the meantime the lady who was the unconscious subject of this impassioned criticism was winning golden opinions in quarters the most difficult—namely, with her own sex. Ella almost forgave her for her designs upon the Commissary, for the way in which she snubbed him under his own roof, whatever she may have done outside of it; and the more she snubbed him the more he said to himself: "She must have that ten thousand pounds," and hugged himself accordingly. As for Gracie, she could have thrown her arms round Miss de Horsingham, or rather, half way round, for a certain reason which she did not think it necessary to mention.

"I really think, my dear Ella," said she, when she and her friend were having their usual chat that night in the latter's room, "that Miss de Horsingham is very nice."

"You mean that she entertains a high respect for Mr. Hugh Darall, and has the

courage of her opinions," returned Ella, patting the other's blushing cheek.

"Well, that was very nice of her indeed, Ella; but, besides that, I really like her. Don't you?"

"I like her as Miss de Horsingham," returned the other, gravely.

"What do you mean, Ella?"

"Why, you little goose, don't you see what she is after? She is after your papa, my dear; and I am not sure that you will like her quite so much when she becomes your step-mother."

Gracie uttered a little scream of horror.

"What must be will be, Gracie. It is merely a question of time, and when it happens, if you don't like it——"

"Like it!" echoed poor Gracie, "I should think it to the last degree hateful and abominable."

"So much the better, darling; for then you will come and live with me. I shall be quite alone—quite alone, Gracie."

The pathos of her friend's tone went to Gracie's heart. Ella's sorrow was, after all, more cruel, and harder to bear, than her own. In the one case, the sacred memory of the dead was outraged; in the other, the living

fibres of love were being strained and torn. The twain whom God had joined were slowly but surely being rent asunder; and one of them, at least, felt every pang.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COUPE.

Our history must now retrace its steps, for a few months, to the day when Cecil Landon left his wife for Wellborough, on the morning after that eventful picnic at Windsor. He had, as he had seemed to do, in reality forgiven his wife for the deception which she had confessed to having practised on him at the time of their marriage; but the thought of it still rankled in his breast. He was profoundly dissatisfied with her, and also dissatisfied with himself at having been so easily persuaded to forgiveness. He was by no means of the hard material out of which are carved domestic tyrants; but, like most conceited men, he resented exceedingly being made the subject of deception.

The incident of the day before, and its probable consequences, also annoyed him far

more than he would have liked to confess; he shrank from the ridicule which was sure to be evoked by it, even more than from the scandal it would create; for, for that he felt there was no serious ground. His wife, he was confident, had told him the truth at last. But not until it had been wrung from her; not until she had made him a laughing-stock to society, and caused him to commit an offence which, in the eyes of Lady Elizabeth Groves (of whose designs upon Mr. Whymper-Hobson he was well aware), would be unpardonable, and he very much cared, if not for the good opinion, at least for the good word of Lady Elizabeth Groves. His sagacity even foresaw that Gossip, with its usual blundering malice, would associate the young man's name with that of Ella, and this, if it did not anger him more than all, made him feel more bitter than aught else against his wife. His nature was, for the best of reasons—self-complacency—incapable of jealousy, but the idea that other people should suppose it possible that Cecil Landon's wife could stoop to encourage such a man as Whymper-Hobson was hateful to him, and she herself—though he would not have acknowledged it—came in for a share of the abhorrence. Her pleading words had scarce done ringing in his ears, her appealing looks had

scarcely faded from his gaze, but they occupied no place in his memory. It was seeking farther back for the rare causes of offence that she had given to him; they were but two—the falsification of her name, and the change of profession into which she had persuaded him; the latter had been effected at least as much for his own sake as for hers; but he did not think of that now. He only reflected that, thanks to her, he was bound upon a disagreeable errand for an indefinite time, and that when he returned from it, it would be, thanks to her, to find himself an exile from certain circles for which he had a liking, and the subject of scandalous comment. The house he had just quitted had no longer the sweet sense of home when his mind dwelt upon it; the wife that he had left alone there had, for the present, lost the attraction for him which hitherto had never failed to draw his heart-strings thither. He was to blame for the most part, and she was to be pitied; and, alas! the more he is to blame, it must needs happen that the more claim will she have upon our pity.

It was with a vexed and gloomy spirit indeed that Cecil Landon drove up to the railway-station, and sprang out of his hansom ere it stopped. He was early for the train, which had been hitherto a thing unusual with him (there

had been no lingering farewells this time when he left his home), but he felt that motion, action, haste were imperative. He was consumed by a fever of the mind, though it was not stirred by expectation nor cheered by hope; and it drove him not towards rest, but to take external stimulants. His heart was full of bitterness, but his eyes were quick as ever to observe all that was passing about him. His wrath was as the anger of a child, which vanishes, or changes to some other passion, when any object of attraction presents itself. At the ticket-office, which had only just been opened, one would-be passenger was already before him. It was a lady, and, to judge by her figure, a young one, though her face could not be seen, since she was in earnest conversation with the railway-clerk, and it was thrust forward almost into the pigeon-hole.

"What a time these women are in getting their tickets," muttered Cecil to himself: "they have always some question to put which common sense would tell them. What rubbish the people talk who want to give them the franchise, when they have not even the intelligence to understand their Bradshaws."

If this had reference to Ella, it was most unjust, for she was particularly "good" at Bradshaw, and thoroughly mistress of herself and of

the route, whenever she had occasion to travel; but then Cecil's frame of mind with respect to her, and—by rapid generalisation—to all women, was just then far from judicial.

"She has been three full minutes already,' continued he, half aloud, and the clerk seeing him consult his watch, and glad of the opportunity to dismiss his importunate customer, inquired, "Where for, sir? You must move on, miss," he added to the young lady, "since the ticket is lost there is no help for it but to pay again."

The young lady uttered a sigh—deeper, one would have thought, than the occasion should have demanded—and turned sorrowfully away.

Even then, Cecil did not see her face; nor, to do him justice, was he influenced by the fact that she was young, or the possibility that she might be pretty; but the sigh touched him, as it would have done had it been uttered by anyone of her sex, or indeed of his own. To his keen ear it spoke of poverty—notwithstanding that the pigeon-hole was for first-class passengers—of an inability to pay; and, towards the poor, Cecil's heart was always tender.

"What is the matter with that young lady?" inquired he, as he took her place.

"Oh, she has lost her return ticket—or says

so; it's a very old dodge if she hasn't," returned the clerk, derisively.

"Where was it she wished to go?"

"To Grantham, just beyond Pullham Junction. She wanted to know whether she could not pay at that end of her journey, instead of this, which would be a queer start."

"Give me a ticket for Grantham."

"I have stamped yours for Wellborough. You certainly said Wellborough," cried the much-enduring clerk. "If men, as well as women, are not to know their own minds, we railway-clerks will have harder work than ever."

"I know *my* mind, which is to have both tickets," observed Cecil, gravely.

"Oh, I see, you wish to pay for the young lady."

The clerk's face was a picture as he gave out the two tickets. He dared not smile, because Cecil's hand was so dangerously near his own face; but he turned purple with suppressed amusement. I am afraid he did not give the young man the credit he deserved for his philanthropic intentions. The young lady had withdrawn to the platform, and when Cecil came up to her, was counting the slender contents of a little purse with an air of anxiety as well as melancholy.

"Here is your ticket, madam," said Cecil, in respectful tones.

"Have you found it, sir? oh, thank you," said she, looking brightly up, and speaking with earnest gratitude. He thought that gentle face, with its little flush of colour, the fairest object he had ever beheld. There was no positive disloyalty to Ella's beauty in his admiration, for there was no comparison between the two women. Ella was a brunette, whereas the young lady in question was a blonde; there was nothing dark about her, except the long eyelashes underneath which looked forth those tender eyes of blue; her complexion was exquisite, it had absolutely no fault, except perhaps an excessive delicacy. The bow of her Cupidon lips was straightened for the moment by a smile as she thanked him, but ere the gracious words had left them, became a bow again.

"This is not my ticket, sir," said she, with gravity; "mine was a half-ticket."

"But you had lost it, the clerk said; so I ventured to supply its place."

He placed it in her hand, lifted his hat, and walked on towards the train, which was waiting by the platform. I have painted him ill, if it is not distinctly understood that Cecil Landon—within certain limits, and with most of us, alas!

there is a limit—was a gentleman. He had no intention of presuming upon the service he had rendered; indeed he thought very little of it; money was not only of no consequence in his own eyes, but he did not recognise its necessary importance in many cases in those of other people. He treated the purchase of the ticket—which, perhaps, had cost him thirty shillings—as though the lady had dropped her glove, and he had picked it up for her.

"But, sir, you mustn't; indeed I can't accept it," exclaimed a quick and agitated voice, close to his ear. She had run up to him, and even touched his arm to draw his attention, which had been directed to the portmanteau a porter was placing for him under the seat of a carriage.

"But you can't travel without a ticket, madam, and there *is* the ticket," said he, smiling, and after the old and attractive fashion too. That touch of her little hand, involuntary as it had been, had moved him strangely.

"But the obligation, sir, is so considerable, and to a complete stranger too."

"Whatever it is, it is on my side," replied Cecil, "if you will condescend to accept the service."

This somewhat high-flown speech evidently flew over the young lady's head. She only saw

that something kind was intended, and ere she could acknowledge it the bell began to ring, and the guard to call out: "Take your seats for Ledbridge, Pullham, and Wellborough. Where are you for, miss? Grantham?—then this is the carriage," and he handed her into the very *coupé* in which Cecil had placed his luggage. She looked a little discomposed; but in those days of *coupés* there were no "ladies' carriages," and she could scarcely have said: "I do not wish to travel with this gentleman."

Cecil noticed the look, and observed, with his hand on his portmanteau: "If you would rather be alone——" but the train was actually in motion ere he finished the sentence, so there was no option for him but to jump in, or be left behind.

"I am sure I ought not to be sorry," said the young lady, simply, as they moved out of the station, "for the opportunity that is thus afforded me of—of—cultivating your further acquaintance; otherwise I should have felt like a downright robber; would you be kind enough, sir, to favour me with your name and address?"

"Oh, certainly!" said Cecil, smiling. "You shall have them both before you reach your journey's end." There was no reason why he

should not have given them at once, yet something—not, alas! his good genius, nor hers—dissuaded him from it.

If he had revealed it to her, he had an idea (quite groundless, for, as it happened, she knew nothing of London) that she would gather from the street where he lived, and which was not a bachelor's quarter, that he was a married man. And I am afraid there was by this time a certain piquancy for him in the fact that this circumstance was unknown to her.

"I will send you the cheque by to-night's post," continued the young lady, who had taken out her pocket-book, and sat, pencil in hand, ready for his communication. "Perhaps you will put it down yourself; I shall feel much easier in my mind, and indeed, sir"—seeing him hesitate—"I must insist upon it."

Thus adjured, he hastily wrote down a few words, closed the book and returned it to her.

"You are very young, or else must be very rich, to have a cheque-book of your own," observed he, smiling.

"It is certainly not for the latter reason," returned she, with an answering smile. "The fact is, my sister and I, being alone in the world, have the sole management of our own little affairs; but it is she who is the woman

of business, and it is her name, not mine, which appears in our pecuniary transactions."

"I have no doubt it is a 'good' name, as we say in the City," laughed Cecil; "but still I should like to know that of the other partner of the firm."

"Since you have given me yours," said she, gravely, "I have no right, nor indeed any reason, to withhold mine: it is Rose Mytton."

"A very pretty and a very appropriate name," said Cecil.

"I don't see that," answered she, simply. "It is rather a funny one in the plural. Mr. Welby—that's our vicar—calls Helen and me the pair of mittens. A little joke goes a long way, down at Grantham."

"When I said it was appropriate, I was referring to your christian-name," observed Cecil.

"Oh, I see, you intend to be complimentary;" and she gave him a grave little bow.

Cecil felt that he had made a mistake—or at least that he had been "forcing the pace" too early, so he hastened to be very matter-of-fact, to erase any unfavourable impression he might have made.

"Good heavens! I never looked after your luggage; did you see it labelled?"

"I have nothing but this," she said, pointing

to a black leather bag, which she had carried on her arm while on the platform. "I was only in London for one day; the fact is, I came up on some business of my sister's, and stayed the night with some friends of ours, who started for the sea-side this morning. That was what made the loss of my return ticket so very inconvenient. I had not enough money left to pay my fare even by the third class; and no one to apply to for more. So you have really done me a very great service."

"No more than anyone else would have done, who had the good fortune to have the opportunity," said Cecil. "But how curious, and indeed shocking, it seems, that the want of a few shillings in her purse should place a young lady like yourself in a position of positive embarrassment."

"You would be very often shocked at Helen and me, I do assure you," returned Miss Mytton, laughing, "if you are shocked at that. When we sit on our special committee of Ways and Means, at the end of every month, the firm often finds itself 'positively embarrassed.'"

"What, in spite of that cheque-book, and the balance at the banker's, that it presupposes?"

"We sometimes bring it down very low indeed," continued the young lady, gaily. "'Do

you think it will stand against another five pounds?' says Helen; because you know the bankers say: 'We expect our customers to keep fifty pounds in hand;' only they are so pleasant and accommodating to Helen and me, that they never make a fuss about it."

"Of course they don't," said Cecil. "They are better pleased, or ought to be, with having the firm of Mytton Sisters on their books, than that of Anybody Brothers, with fifty thousand pounds."

"Well, I am not quite sure of that," laughed Miss Rose; "but at all events they never complain."

"But if you are not the acting member of the firm, how comes it that you come to town on business, instead of the senior partner—for I conclude you are the junior?"

"Yes, I am the junior, though only by a year or two. Well, the fact is, my sister was not quite well, and I insisted upon going to London in her place. She objected very much, and even had the cruelty to suggest that I was not competent to undertake the expedition. She actually said I should never find my way to town and back; and how nearly that prophecy has come true! She will never trust me to go from home alone again, I expect."

"But I hope the business got transacted all right."

"Oh yes; I think I have managed that. Are you a judge of drawings?"

"I know something about them, in a stiff professional way," said Cecil, with reference to his studies at the Military Academy.

"Oh, you are an engineer perhaps?"

"No," said Cecil, blushing; he felt that he could never reveal his true calling to this charming young creature. "I was educated, however, with some such intention."

"Well, then, you will be able to judge."

From an outside pocket of the leather bag the young lady took a small portfolio, full of sketches, some of which she handed to him. They were for the most part illustrations of rather striking situations—combats, quarrels, the partings and meetings of lovers, and so on.

"They are very vigorous," remarked Cecil, "and, so far as my opinion goes, of quite exceptional merit. But the subjects are a little what may be called 'sensational'—don't you think so?"

"Yes, indeed I do," answered the young lady, laughing, "and so does the artist. 'My dear,' says Helen to me sometimes, quite gravely, 'would you be so good as to let me have a pork-chop for supper?'—I am the housekeeper, you

must know, and provide for the establishment—'I must have some terrible dreams to-night, in order to be up to my work for "The Raven's Wing" to-morrow.'. The 'Raven's Wing' is a magazine, to which, among others, my sister supplies the illustrations. It is very exacting in the way of 'sensation.' The editor writes: 'You must do us a good Vampire for the next part;' and, never having seen a vampire, poor Helen has to stimulate her imagination."

Cecil was much tickled with this idea, and laughed as he had not laughed certainly for the last twenty-four hours.

"And all these other pictures, the murders, and the combats, and the falling down steep precipices, are they all for magazines?"

"Yes, some have been bespoken, but most of them have been drawn, as Helen says, on 'spec'—you would be delighted with Helen, since you are fond of fun—she wishes to increase her connection with the periodicals, and had made an appointment to show some drawings to a certain editor, when she was taken ill—or at least with a bad sore-throat—and so I kept it for her. I am glad to say that her interests have not suffered by her absence."

"I can easily imagine it, since you were her proxy," said Cecil, quietly, and as though

stating some mathematical fact. She did not give him this time that reproof of the grave little bow, and he felt, to use an aquatic phrase, that "he was gaining."

Though he kept his eyes still fixed upon the drawings, the blush of pleasure that rose to her pretty cheek did not escape him, nor the nervous plunge her hand made into the portfolio for more pictures.

"The funniest part of the whole affair," said she, "is that Helen herself does not care for figure-drawing. Her own line is landscape, which unhappily is in little or no demand with the magazines.—Now that is what I call a pretty picture."

She put into his hand an etching of a small country house. Every detail of it was exquisite, and though small, perfectly distinct, and even elaborate. It showed a low-roofed dwelling, with French windows opening upon a small but well-kept garden. Above it, like some giant sentinel, towered a great chalk hill, here bare, there covered with foliage, and crowned with a forest of beeches.

"What a charming retreat!" cried Cecil. "Am I right in conjecturing it to be the country house of the firm?"

"You have guessed it," replied the young

lady, delightedly. "It was somebody's hunting-box at one time, and used to be called 'The Box,' but when we took it the vicar insisted on its name being altered; he said it sounded 'horsey;' so we now call it 'The Casket.'"

"And I hope the vicar has christened its inmates 'The Jewels.'"

"What clever guesses you make. He really does call us his jewels."

"I object to that," said Cecil, promptly. "He has no right to use the possessive pronoun, has he? You can't be both his jewels, at all events." It was curious how interested he felt in this absurd inquiry; and in making quite certain that it was Miss Helen Mytton—if it was either—and not Miss Rose, whom the parson called "his jewel."

"Mr. Welby is a privileged person," she replied, laughing, "and calls people what he pleases."

"He has re-christened their cottage, but is that the limit as to change of name he is likely to go with either of the firm?"

"We are neither of us likely to become Mrs. Welby, if you mean that."

"Well, I did mean that," confessed Cecil, with a sigh of relief; "though I feel that it was impertinent in me to express it. Pray forgive me."

"Well, you see, there is still that money owing to you for my ticket," answered Miss Rose, archly; "and debtors are obliged to forgive things."

"Then I should like to remain always your creditor," said Cecil, naïvely; "that I might make little slips of behaviour, and be so bewitchingly forgiven. Pray thank your sister," added he, before her forehead could form a frown, "for the great pleasure her drawings have afforded an ignorant but admiring stranger;" and he began to wrap them up again in the tissue paper in which they had been folded.

"Your name is in my pocket-book, though you have not mentioned it," said she, softly; "and for my part I shall scarcely consider you as a stranger after your great kindness."

"I am sure I shall not consider you so, after yours," replied Cecil, almost below his breath, though they were quite alone.

He had not only forgotten all about his quarrel with his wife by this time, but almost her very existence. Yet it is fair to say that he would not have done this but for the quarrel. Let me whisper in your ear, ladies: There is no time so dangerous to let a husband go out of your sight as just after you have had a disagreement with him. The most faithful, the

most dutiful, the best of men are, on such occasions, if not prone to disloyalty, exceedingly susceptible of the influences of other women. "If my wife doesn't appreciate me," say these vain and unstable creatures, when any one of the other sex is making herself agreeable to them, though in the most innocent and ordinary way; "here is another—worth a dozen of her to look at—who has better taste." I have written it in the "vulgar tongue," but that is what they feel, every one of them, from an archbishop downwards.

END OF VOL. II.

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